

THE ECO-JUSTICE MOVEMENT MEETS ANIMAL RIGHTS  
IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A dissertation submitted to the  
Theological School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2026



## ABSTRACT

### THE ECO-JUSTICE MOVEMENT MEETS ANIMAL RIGHTS IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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This dissertation addresses the eco-justice movement, an environmental social movement that emerged within mainline Protestantism in the late twentieth century, and the movement's attention and inattention to the moral status of nonhuman animals both within its theoethical claims and its practice in denominational contexts. Using the context of The United Methodist Church as a case study, I argue that despite the stated nonanthropocentric values of the eco-justice movement, eco-justice theoethics in practice consistently fail to attend to the moral status of animals beyond sweeping generalized valuing of animal species.

I trace potential causes of lack of eco-justice attention to the value of animals, pointing to eco-justice's support of the human-focused environmental justice movement, eco-justice's resonance with ecological holist environmental philosophies, the single-issue focus of the animal rights movement, and the slow process of denominational change as barriers to a more animal-friendly eco-justice theoethic. Employing an ecofeminist lens, I suggest potential pathways for a transformed eco-justice framework that values the moral status of each animal life.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Karen Mudge Quick. My mother has been my “first reader” during every step of my doctoral career, reading and editing every paper, every comprehensive exam, every conference presentation, every draft, and every chapter, offering enthusiastic and unconditional support at every step. She never once doubted my ability to complete this work, and her love and encouragement throughout this process has been an incredible wellspring of strength. I could not have done this work without you – thank you, Mom. I love you, and I am blessed by your unwavering faith in me.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to a wonderful community of support that have made faithfully present travel companions during the journey of writing this dissertation. In addition to my mom, Karen Mudge Quick, I have been supported by my family – immediate, extended, and adopted – in tangible ways (such as buying me the very laptop on which I write these words) and intangible ways. To my brothers and sister-in-law, Jim and Jen, TJ, and Todd, and to my nephew Sam and niece Siggy, and to all of my family, thank you, and I love you all so much. Reverend Richelle Duchano Goff and Reverend Dr. Heather Williams have been faithful friends, lifting me up in moments of self-doubt. Dearest friends: you ground me. I likewise cannot imagine completing my doctoral work without Hunter Edwards and Neto Albuquerque, whose joyful presence in my life is an unexpected blessing. Kenia Vanessa Mendoza: you kept me on my toes! I am thankful for the dedication you brought to completing your own work, which helped me stay focused on meeting my own goals. Lerato Pitso: Thank you for making the long waiting at my dissertation defense more bearable! To my household of co-learners: I am constantly amazed by what you have done to follow the paths to which you have been called, and I am inspired by you. I also carry in my heart the Reverend Dr. Tanya Linn Bennett. Some of these words were written in her home. She cheered me on, even in her final weeks, and I am so glad I could share a part of this journey with her. She is so loved and so missed.

I want to express my gratitude to the people of Gouverneur First and North Gouverneur United Methodist Churches in the North Country of New York. I was

-serving as the pastor of these congregations when I announced that I was returning to school *again*. Within weeks of my announcement, the Covid-19 pandemic began to unfold, and our waning days together as pastor and congregation became even more complicated. Despite the circumstances, the congregations encouraged and supported me in pursuing a new path. I am forever thankful to them for making my shift into academia easier.

This dissertation is only possible because of the wisdom of those who freely shared with me from their seasoned experiences as eco-justice advocates in interviews. Paz Artaza-Regan, Cassandra Carmichael, Reverend Dr. Mark Davies, Reverend Sharon Delgado, Jaydee Hanson, John Hill, Reverend Dr. Dana Horrell, Avery Lamb, Reverend Dr. George McClain, Reverend Dr. Jeania Ree Moore, Reverend Jenny Phillips, Dr. Jessica Smith, and Reverend Pat Watkins, your invaluable insights have not only contributed to important documentation of the eco-justice movement, but your stories of persistence in justice-seeking are inspiring and hopeful. Thank you.

I made frequent use of the resources of the General Commission on Archives and History to complete my research, and I am indebted to their staff for their assistance with my work. Frances Lyons repeatedly provided me with guidance along the way, and Rae Guthrie retrieved and scanned documents for me. Thank you, both, for your time.

Finally, I offer my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Laurel Kearns, and my dissertation committee, Reverend Dr. Traci West, Dr. Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, and Reverend Dr. Christopher Carter. Laurel, your early work on eco-justice is the foundation of my dissertation, and helped me understand my own formation as an environmentalist more clearly. Fittingly, part of this dissertation was crafted in the eco-haven of your

home, sitting on your porch, watching the many animals that share space in your yard.

Traci: You have always challenged me in the very best ways, never letting me settle for easy answers, while also managing to be so supportive and encouraging. I treasure that dual role that you navigate so well.

Elaine: I was thrilled when you joined the Drew community, since I already knew of your scholarly reputation. You stand in a line of Drew faculty excellence, and I am thankful the time was right for you to be a part of my journey.

Chris: When I applied to the PhD program, my essay was filled with quotations from your work. Having you as part of my committee is an unexpected privilege that brings me such joy.

To all of you: When you all agreed to mentor me in this work, I felt that I had assembled a “dream team” to support me in this process. You are brilliant scholars, whose wisdom and guidance are sought out by so many who are eager to learn from you. I feel incredibly blessed that I can be counted among your students. Thank you for all the ways that you have shaped and will continue to shape me as a scholar and as a seeker of justice.

## INTRODUCTION

“*Animal Life* – We support regulations that protect the life and health of animals, including those ensuring humane treatment of pets and other domestic animals, and the painless slaughtering of meat animals, fish, and fowl. Furthermore, we encourage the preservation of animal species now threatened with extinction.” – The Social Principles, *1972 United Methodist Book of Discipline*, ¶71 B<sup>1</sup>

At the 1972 session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church (UMC), the body of delegates approved an official set of social statements called the Social Principles. The UMC was the newly named body of two denominations that joined together at the 1968 uniting conference – The Methodist Church and the smaller Evangelical United Brethren Church. At the 1968 General Conference, delegates enabled a Social Principles Study Commission to report to the 1972 General Conference with recommendations for a cohesive statement of social beliefs for the new denomination. After some debate and revision, both in legislative committees and on the floor of the General Conference, the Social Principles were adopted, and though they have been amended many times since then, they remain an integral part of The United Methodist Church’s theological and ethical framework.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The 1972 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), 113.

<sup>2</sup> The General Conference is the legislative body of The United Methodist Church, made up of several hundred lay and clergy delegates in equal numbers from around the globe. The General Conference is the only official body of the UMC that can “speak” for the denomination. General Conference typically meets every four years, where it acts on petitions submitted by individuals, church groups, and denominational bodies. Most petitions adopted by General Conference either amend the Book of Discipline, the official polity book of The UMC, or the Book of Resolutions, a companion to The UMC Social Principles with expansive social policy statements.

Most of the sections of the new Social Principles reflected existing areas of social engagement by the predecessor bodies: The Nurturing Community, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and The World Community. These sections addressed topics ranging from racism to boycotts to war and military service. One section of the Social Principles represented an emerging area of interest for the denomination: The first section of the document was called The Natural World, addressing the expected topics of environmental concerns about pollution and non-human animals, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, about space exploration, expanding the notion of the natural world to the cosmos. The Study Commission chose to add this new section after reading and discussing reports from several positions papers and engaging in listening sessions in each jurisdiction and in several local churches where participants were invited to present additional papers. Several issues of social concern emerged from these gatherings and reports, some that represented new and growing concerns not previously addressed by predecessor denominations. The Commission's report states, "The United Methodist Church is dedicated to dealing with those issues which have troubled mankind over its long history, and at the same time it must be highly sensitive to new issues, directions, and responsibilities." The report names "ecology (environmental stewardship)," or "environmental pollution" and "population problems" among its "emerging" areas of concern.<sup>3</sup> The addition of ecologically focused language in the new Social Principles reflected a growing global awareness around environmental concerns. Significant events that potentially shaped the new Social

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<sup>3</sup>United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1970 Special Session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1970), 10.

Principles included the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's groundbreaking work *Silent Spring*, the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill,<sup>4</sup> the 1970 establishment of "Earth Day" (which was, in turn, inspired in part by the 1968 image "Earthrise," a color photo of earth taken by the crew of Apollo 8 as they orbited the moon<sup>5</sup>),<sup>6</sup> and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, founded in 1970.<sup>7</sup>

Along with these markers of environmental consciousness in the wider society, the adoption of the Social Principles, including its "Natural World" focus, symbolically marks the start of the denomination's alignment with an emerging faith-based approach to environmentalism called the eco-justice movement. The eco-justice movement, a predominantly Christian response to environmental concerns emerging among mainline Protestant groups in the 1970s, focuses on an intersectional social justice approach, linking liberation and justice for the earth with human rights, especially economic, gender, and racial equality.<sup>8</sup> In her 1994 article "Saving the Creation: Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Lila Thulin, "How an Oil Spill 50 Years Ago Inspired the First Earth Day," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 22 2019, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-oil-spill-50-years-ago-inspired-first-earth-day-180972007/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Isabell Gerretsen, "The 1968 photo that changed the world," The BBC, 11 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230511-earthrise-the-photo-that-sparked-an-environmental-movement> for commentary on the importance of this image. Accessed 14 June 2024. See Isabell Gerretsen, "The 1968 photo that changed the world," The BBC, 11 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230511-earthrise-the-photo-that-sparked-an-environmental-movement> for commentary on the importance of this image. Accessed 14 June 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Darryl W. Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Yrigoyen Jr., John G. McEllhenney, and Kenneth E. Row, *United Methodism at Forty: looking back, looking forward* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Chapters 1 & 2 will contain a more robust examination of the origins and values of the eco-justice movement. Although my work focuses on mainline Protestant denominations, some Orthodox, Catholic, and Black Protestant denominations have also played an active and important role in eco-justice work.

Environmentalism in the United States,” sociologist Laurel Kearns identified three types of frameworks employed by Christian churches as they engage in environmental work. Kearns described the eco-justice ethic in contrast to a Christian stewardship ethic (which has a theological framework with an evangelical focus on human wrongdoing or sinfulness, and biblical commandments) and a creation spirituality ethic (a more panentheistic approach that often thrives outside of official church structures).<sup>9</sup> Out of these three, eco-justice stresses societal change more than individual change, aims at government and institutional responses, and lifts up God-as-liberator imagery.<sup>10</sup> In *To Care for Creation*, sociologist Stephen Ellingson builds on Kearns’ framework, sharing helpful descriptions of the eco-justice frame.<sup>11</sup> The eco-justice ethic eschews an individualistic approach to environmental concerns, answering the biblical charge to care for the most vulnerable and most impacted by ecological devastation. The focus of eco-justice, Ellingson writes, is on “understanding and acting to change the systems of power and institutional forces ... that produce a world marred by ecological and social inequality.”<sup>12</sup> In his 1997 article “The Post-World War II Eco-Justice Movement in Christian Theology,” J. Ronald Engel emphasized that beyond the support of “liberal Christians,” the eco-justice movement has been supported by Christian institutions like the National Council of Churches (NCC), the World Council of Churches, and Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Laurel Kearns, "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1996), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712004>, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712004>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Ellingson, *To Care for Creation : The Emergence of the Religious Environmental Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

seminaries and publishing houses. The eco-justice movement grew and thrived within denominational institutions, within ecumenical partnerships, while being directed at influencing institutional and governmental policies.<sup>13</sup>

As Kearns noted, the eco-justice movement connects with the “already present Christian social justice framework” in mainline denominations and it especially focuses on linking environmental degradation and inequality faced by people of color, including Indigenous communities, and the economically disadvantaged.<sup>14</sup> But strikingly, despite the statement from the Social Principles that opened this chapter, animals are mostly missing from the eco-justice movement in practice. I argue that despite its expressed claims to the contrary, the eco-justice movement *in practice* still employs a harmful form of anthropocentrism at its core.<sup>15</sup> The eco-justice movement, through its activities, legislative priorities and advocacy in ecclesial polity, centers the human and the impact of environmental harm on human communities in problematic ways.

Because of its human-centric focus, I argue that while the eco-justice movement includes attention to nonhuman animals insofar as animals as a “whole” are part of “creation,” the eco-justice framework rarely focuses on the rights of individual animals, nor on human relationships with and responsibility for individual animals.<sup>16</sup> Rather,

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<sup>13</sup> J. Ronald Engel, "The Post-World War II Eco-Justice Movement in Christian Theology: Patterns and Issues," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (1997), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27944007>

<sup>14</sup> Kearns, "Saving the Creation," 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> The eco-justice framework is not the only environmental approach that critiques anthropocentrism; indeed, critiquing the dominant worldview of anthropocentrism is a key component of many environmental philosophies and ethical frameworks. I discuss what makes some forms of anthropocentrism and a human-centric eco-justice ethic so problematic later in this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> I use the terms “animals” and “nonhuman animals” throughout this dissertation. Although “nonhuman animals,” used alongside the phrase “human animals,” helpfully emphasizes the commonalities

nonhuman animals are understood collectively, as species groups and a part of creation to be protected, but are not given attention as creatures with their own rights. Further, since the eco-justice framework is the primary environmental approach of mainline Christian denominations in the United States, denominations likewise speak of and advocate for nonhuman animals only collectively, focused on the survival and thriving of species, but not on the daily experiences and thriving of individual animals.

I argue that the absence of sustained attention to nonhuman animals in mainline denominations raises some key issues for the eco-justice movement. To support my argument, I employ a case study of The United Methodist Church (UMC), including tracing the crafting of the Social Principles, mentioned above, their revision over the decades, and the way they have been implemented. Immersed in an eco-justice approach to environmentalism, The UMC has never developed or adopted a detailed, consistent, or significant animal ethic nor committed to the pursuit of animal rights (discussed later and in Chapter 4), a claim I demonstrate through extensive archival research and oral histories. Examining the history of the eco-justice movement, I attribute the eco-justice movement's human-centered focus in theology and advocacy in part to the movement's important and needed emphasis on racial justice and its affiliation with the environmental justice movement, a related movement eventually coalescing under that name in the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s to address disproportionate ecological harm to Black, poor, and other minoritized human communities.<sup>17</sup>

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between humans and animals, the shorter “animals” is more succinct and reflects the most common usage in many of the sources I will engage in this work.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert D. Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983). Sociologist Bullard is a prolific writer, leading voice, and activist in

Using the decisions, policies, and actions of official legislative and advocacy groups of the late twentieth century UMC as a context for research, I argue that a more authentic eco-justice ethic, one that more completely embodies an intersectional social justice ethic and liberative theology, must include attention to the rights of individual nonhuman animals. An eco-justice approach seeks to raise the profile of ecological justice, demonstrating that it is one of many interrelated areas of justice work, alongside gender justice, racial justice, economic justice, disability justice, justice for queer communities and other similar causes. Justice for the earth, eco-justice would posit, is simply part of justice for all. I conclude that a more “authentic” eco-justice ethic cannot leave out an important related area of justice that intertwines with these other areas: the eco-justice movement should give attention to the spiritual, theological, and ethical place of individual non-human animals, valued for their own sakes, otherwise it is not truly ecological justice. Failure to include the flourishing of non-human animals in the values of the eco-justice framework perpetuates a negative anthropocentric ideology that reinforces problematic dualistic constructions, tied to the ecological crisis, which serve to undermine and undercut the very goals of justice and equality that the eco-justice movement champions.

I connect eco-justice values to the ethic of environmental holism, favored by thinkers such as environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III, who also played an important role in shaping views on nonhuman animals in the eco-justice movement.<sup>18</sup>

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the environmental justice movement. I explore environmental justice and its relationship with eco-justice in Chapter 1.

<sup>18</sup> Rolston featured in some publications from eco-justice movement leaders, contributing chapters outlining an eco-justice view of animals. I describe his contributions and Rolston’s significance in the movement as a primary voice on the place of animals in eco-justice theoethics in Chapters 1 and 4.

According to Rolston, holism engages a paradigm of community, valuing eco-systems and the “biotic community,” and advocating for our “duties” toward protecting the biotic community, both biological and moral commitments.<sup>19</sup> While holism seeks to be less anthropocentric, this framework, as social ethicist Anna L. Peterson points out, is in tension with animal rights. I engage Peterson as a primary interlocutor, and draw on her work to place my critique of the eco-justice movement in relation to the ongoing tensions between animal rights perspectives, and philosophies like environmental holism: how do different ecological perspectives and theories hold space both for the importance of the preservation of species in a time of disastrous species extinction, and care for the lives of individual creatures in a time when human understanding of the complexity and richness of animal lives has expanded? How might these perspectives be applied in a religious framework? Peterson responds specifically to the history of conflicts between species-oriented environmental frameworks like holism and animal rights perspectives, which tend to emphasize individual animals, arguing that they rely on sharp nature-culture dualisms and binary thinking that separates individuals and wholes.<sup>20</sup> Reading Peterson in conversation with other eco-feminists provides a rich pool of wisdom to wrestle with the ways anthropocentrism shapes the eco-justice movement, and indeed, its presence in the larger modern worldview.

The eco-justice approach is the environmental framework typically used by institutional mainline Protestant churches. Since the eco-justice movement, then, is

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<sup>19</sup> Holmes Rolston III, "Duties to Ecosystems," in *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive and Critical Essays*, ed. J. Baird Callicott (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 256.

<sup>20</sup> Anna L. Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

closely associated with the official leadership and hierarchical structures of denominations, the institutional eco-justice approach tends to reinforce dominant views, including the societal norm of a problematic anthropocentric environmentalism, despite eco-justice's anti-anthropocentric value statements.<sup>21</sup> Institutions are powerful, and the viewpoint of the institution tends to prevail when encountering demands for change. I engage with the work of scholars of denominational and institutional church change such as religion scholar Jane Ellen Nickell to help me better analyze how The UMC's eco-justice perspective limits the denomination's commitments to non-human animals. Nickell, drawing upon the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizes that churches tend to act to reify their own institutional privilege.<sup>22</sup> With Nickell and others as conversation partners such as Jennifer R. Ayres, Rick Elgendy, Darryl Stephens, and Steven Tipton, I explore how institutions like denominations wrestle with, resist, work alongside, or lead in social change.<sup>23</sup>

In a critical season for planetary survival, an eco-justice framework that fails to meaningfully engage with individual nonhuman animals, and thus fails to be as robust,

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<sup>21</sup> Kearns, "Saving the Creation," 56; Engel, "The Post-World War II Eco-Justice Movement." The eco-justice framework is not exclusive to mainline Protestantism; some Orthodox and many historically Black Protestant denominations have also employed the eco-justice framework.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Ellen Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved: Methodists Debate Race, Gender, and Homosexuality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011); Rick Elgendy, *Life Among the Powers: A Political Spirituality of Resistance*, Kindle Edition vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024); Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*; Steven M. Tipton, *Public Pulpits: Methodists and mainline churches in the moral argument of public life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). abigail mohaupt's recent work on divestment from fossil fuels in the Presbyterian Church USA also wrestles with the challenges and practices of environmentalism and denominational change. abigail mohaupt, "Where Your Treasure Is: Orchestrating a Theological Social Movement on Climate Change, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and Divestment from Fossil Fuels" (Ph.D., Drew University, 2024) (31243471).

intersectional, and ethically clear and consistent as it could be, only becomes more incomplete. After my examination and analysis of the eco-justice movement in The UMC, I propose a vision for expanding a commitment to nonhuman animals, particularly *individual* nonhuman animals, by suggesting a transformed eco-justice theoretical framework of The United Methodist Church. In Chapter 5, I employ an ecofeminist lens as a theoretical and methodological approach both to better elaborate on the failures of the eco-justice approach to environmentalism and to advocate for a stronger eco-justice ethic that more adequately includes non-human animals as a vital part of creation care. An ecofeminist lens aids me in articulating the negative consequences of overlooking animal rights, revealing linkages between overlooking non-human animals and other injustices aimed at all who are grouped together as insignificant “others.” The commitment of many ecofeminists to intersectional, interdisciplinary perspectives along with the consistent and persistent attention by many ecofeminist scholars to including nonhuman animals in their engagement and activism make ecofeminism a helpful approach for my research. I ground my research in ecofeminist scholars like Marti Kheel, Corey Wrenn, Donna Haraway, Carol Adams, Val Plumwood, Aph and Syl Ko, and others, drawing support from their work and a wider field of ecofeminist scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

As climate devastation increases in intensity, mainline churches can play a vital role in social visioning, embracing and enacting denominational policies and advocacy

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<sup>24</sup> Marti Kheel, *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Corey Lee Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest: Animal Rights in the Age of Nonprofits* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat - 25th Anniversary Edition : A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, vol. [Twentieth anniversary edition], Bloomsbury Revelations Series, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), Book; Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Aph Ko and Syl Ko, *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* (New York: Mirror Books, 2017).

plans that potentially impact both church and society. The institutional church, shaped by the social movements within it, can speak and act prophetically about moral worth across species, moral worth for all “others.”<sup>25</sup> In examining the social visioning of the mainline church that serves as the context of my case study, however, I also push for a wider application of my research findings. I ask questions about how denominational and institutional change takes place. Social movements and institutions, including the church, are caught up in cycles of change; the church is both an agent of social change, and also is changed by internal and external social movements.<sup>26</sup> The institutional church can stunt, embrace, and/or also lead a justice-seeking movement. In an era of unparalleled environmental devastation, probing the capabilities of mainline denominations specifically and of religions more broadly in casting and implementing a vision for a just society for all creation is a task worth pursuing.

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<sup>25</sup> Some research questions whether religious environmental movements are effective in changing constituents’ views on environmentalism, finding little evidence of transformed views about the need for ecological care for the earth. Some researchers note, however, that little denominationally-specific research has addressed questions about effectiveness, suggesting that case studies may be a better tool for demonstrating impact in particular settings. See an example in Carl Michael Hand and Jessica Leigh Crowe, "Examining the Impact of Religion on Environmentalism 1993-2010: Has the Religious Environmental Movement Made a Difference?," *Electronic Green Journal* 34 (2012), <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/G313412946>. See also Bron Taylor’s two-part work reviewing religion’s role in relationship to human behavior and environmental crises: Bron Taylor, "Religion and Environmental Behaviour (Part One): World Religions and the Fate of the Earth," *The Ecological Citizen* 3 (2019); Bron Taylor, "Religion and Environmental Behaviour (Part Two): Dark-Green Nature Spiritualities and the Fate of the Earth," *The Ecological Citizen* 3 (2020).

<sup>26</sup> Whether churches play a role in social change, and how significant a role churches play has certainly been debated, but I clearly fall on the “yes” side of this argument. Yes, the church has and can play a leading role in social change. Krystal Hays and Jennifer Costello share a brief overview of studies affirming the church as change agent in their introduction to a full journal issue dedicated to the church’s role in impacting communities in Krystal Hays and Jennifer Costello, "Churches as Agents of Community Change: An Introduction to the Issue," *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 51, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2021.1924592>.

## Significance of the Work

This project to re-envision an eco-justice framework by the inclusion of a more intentional animal rights ethic within mainline Protestant traditions addresses important gaps in existing scholarship and contributes to developing academic disciplines. The aim of this project is to make an important contribution particularly to the interdisciplinary field of animal studies, as well as to the related and intersecting fields of sociology, ethics, religion and ecology, and denominational and institutional change. Despite the influence of the eco-justice movement on the environmental work of mainline denominations, few publications document the history of the movement or assess its strengths and weaknesses. Kearns, who proposed a typology for assessing the environmental approaches of various Christian movements, describes the eco-justice frame, but her primary study focus in much of her work is evangelical churches with a stewardship framework.<sup>27</sup> Ellingson likewise does address the eco-justice movement, but his attention to eco-justice is brief, one of many environmental frames he explores.<sup>28</sup>

Other non-sociological scholars, such as ethicists and theologians, spend in-depth time exploring the theology of eco-justice, including Dieter Hessel, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Michael Nausner, Larry Rasmussen, and Willis Jenkins.<sup>29</sup> Their contributions

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<sup>27</sup> Kearns, "Saving the Creation."

<sup>28</sup> Ellingson, *To Care for Creation*.

<sup>29</sup> See Dieter T. Hessel, "Foreword," in *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, ed. William E. Gibson (Albany, NY: SUNY IT, 2012); Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious ethics in a new key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, Religions of the World and Ecology, (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000); Michael Nausner, "Eco-Justice as Mutual Participation?," in *Doing Climate Justice*, ed. Jan Niklas Collet et al. (Paderborn, Germany: Brill Schöningh, 2022).

are important, and I draw on both Hessel's descriptions of the values of the eco-justice movement and Jenkins's exploration of the junctures and dissonances between eco-justice and environmental social theory later in this work. These authors, however, do not spend significant time exploring the eco-justice movement as a movement practiced in mainline traditions. Presbyterian minister William Gibson's edited volume *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey* is a valuable resource documenting the origins and history of the eco-justice movement, of which he was a leader, although his work focuses mostly on the early years of the movement.<sup>30</sup> None of these works address nonhuman animals and their place in the eco-justice approach beyond broad appeals to humans being a part of creation with all other creatures. None address animal rights and how individual animals fit into an eco-justice ethic. I aim to address this gap, adding to the small field of animal advocacy studies from a Christian socio-ethical framework. I locate my work among the theory-practice endeavors by theologians, sociologists, ethicists, and activists who seek to understand how animals "fit" in religious traditions. I intend to demonstrate the need for (and the barriers to) a robust animal ethic in the eco-justice centered UMC, contributing needed scholarship that adds depth and a theoretical framework for activism and advocacy in these fields.

### Key Terms and Concepts

Some of the key themes and terms in this dissertation need further description and clarification, since some of the topics with which I engage include contested meaning and

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<sup>30</sup> William E. Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey* (Albany, NY: SUNY IT, 2012).

layered concepts. Before proceeding, I define how the terms eco-justice, animal rights, anthropocentrism, and ecofeminism are used in this work.

### *Eco-Justice*

I have already touched briefly on a description of the eco-justice movement, and I will outline the history of the eco-justice movement in Chapter 1.<sup>31</sup> Here, I expand a description of the eco-justice movement's principles to help clarify and focus my work at the outset. In his edited volume, *Eco-Justice – The Unfinished Journey*, William E. Gibson<sup>32</sup> summarizes the main tenets of the eco-justice movement, drawing on the work of Chris Cowap, a longtime leader of the NCC's Eco-Justice Working Group (EJWG) from its founding in 1983.<sup>33</sup> Gibson lists seven "key elements," the first several of which connect with anthropocentrism. Eco-justice rejects "the anthropocentric valuation of the nonhuman strictly in terms of what is good for humans" and it "[recognizes] that the anthropocentric way of valuing and devaluing nature is deeply embedded in Western

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<sup>31</sup> The eco-justice movement is not monolithic, and it overlaps with other environmental movements. For example, I outline both the important relationship and meaningful differences between the eco-justice movement and the environmental justice movement, a people-focused stream of environmentalism focused on environmental racism, in Chapter 1. This work also engages an ecofeminist lens, and some ecofeminist theologians are grounded in ecojustice theology, as I discuss later in this work.

<sup>32</sup> At the time of writing, Gibson was the Director Emeritus of the Eco-Justice Project at the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University. A Presbyterian clergyperson and PhD in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary, Gibson also served as editor of *The Egg: A Journal of Eco-Justice* for a decade. See "William Gibson," *Presbyterians for Earth Care*, <https://presbyearthcare.org/william-gibson/> (Accessed July 2 2025) for a short biography. In addition, see Chapter 1 for further exploration of Gibson's work and writing.

<sup>33</sup> Cowap served as Director of Economic and Social Justice for the National Council of Churches from 1974 to 1988, and worked with the NCC's Eco-Justice Working Group (EJWG) from its founding in 1983 through the rest of her tenure at the NCC.

technocratic civilization.”<sup>34</sup> Gibson and others specifically link this anthropocentric ideology with the concept of dominion drawn from Genesis 1, saying that an eco-justice perspective endeavors to acknowledge oppressive interpretations of domination as theological misunderstandings. Two more elements focus on connections between economic justice and ecological justice.<sup>35</sup> Gibson’s strong statements about eco-justice and anthropocentrism are important to my thesis, and I return to these values later in this work as I assess whether and how these values are *practiced* in the eco-justice movement.

The introduction to *Eco-Justice* provides additional insights into the values that shape eco-justice. Social ethicist and Presbyterian eco-theologian Dieter Hessel identifies several characteristics of what he describes as a “mature eco-justice ethic.”<sup>36</sup> An eco-justice ethic is intersectional, and justice for humans cannot be separated from justice for the earth. Ecological justice is intertwined with social and economic justice, and an eco-justice vision has to include social justice to be a robust and sustainable hope for the future.<sup>37</sup> The eco-justice ethic, writes Hessel, is not confined to traditional understandings of what is “environmental,” but instead “[intersects] major social problems and [affects] every sector of society.”<sup>38</sup> Hessel articulates a relational eco-justice ethic, one that

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<sup>34</sup>Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. This understanding of eco-justice particularly as a blending of ecological and economic justice also surfaces during interviews I conducted, which I will detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>36</sup> Hessel, "Foreword," xii. Hessel, like Gibson, was an ordained clergyperson. He held a degree in Christian Social Ethics from Graduate Theological Union, and worked as the director of the Presbyterian Church USA’s social witness policy. See "Presbyterian Ethicist and Eco-Justice Advocate the Rev. Dr. Dieter T. Hessel Dies at 87," Presbyterian News Service, 2023, accessed 18 April, 2026, <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2023/10/18/ethicist-and-eco-justice-advocate-rev-dr-dieter-t-hessel-dies-87>.

<sup>37</sup> Hessel, "Foreword," xii-xiii, xiv-xv.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., xiii.

envisions “otherkind” as “kin” to humankind: “We all come from the same beginning and share common elements.” Realizing our common heritage leads to “[decentering] and [resituating] the sovereign human self.”<sup>39</sup> Hessel’s claim of an eco-justice ethic that decenters the human and emphasizes kinship with all creation needs further consideration in connection to my thesis, and I return to his description later in this work. Such claims aside, Hessel’s descriptions of eco-justice clearly articulate the framework’s commitment to and vision for eco-justice as one aspect of a full vision of social justice for both society and creation. Eco-justice should not be disengaged from other movements for justice, but instead be one aspect of a quest for justice for the whole of creation.

### *Animal Rights*

The term “animal rights” is complex and its usage is sometimes fraught, eliciting sharp reactions from interested scholars and activists.<sup>40</sup> Some who engage in theoretical or activist work for nonhuman animals strongly reject “rights” language, finding it unhelpful or even inaccurate, while others embrace it comfortably. After briefly addressing some of the foremost areas of conflict connected to the term “animal rights,” I elaborate on the reasons I choose to continue using the term “animal rights” in this dissertation. In chapter 4, I engage the animal rights movement more extensively, bringing it into conversation with environmental movements related to eco-justice.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Animal rights lawyer/activist Gary L. Francione, for example, cites ideological differences about the animal rights movement as the cause of the end of his working partnership *and* his friendship with Tom Regan. Gary L. Francione, "Reflections on Tom Regan and the Animal Rights Movement that Once Was," *Between the Species* 21, Article 1, no. 1 (2018): 7.

One primary “division” in the animal rights movement pertains to a conflict over strategies and results: what is the ultimate aim of the movement, how can this aim be achieved, and what are morally acceptable steps and strategies to attain movement goals. Animal *welfare* advocates champion incremental improvements of the living conditions and treatment of animals living in captivity for various purposes.<sup>41</sup> Advocates of the animal welfare approach tend to focus on individual issues and campaigns, such as ending a particular type of animal exploitation in a specific situation, like seeking to increase the size of battery cages for egg-laying chickens, but not seeking to end the use of chickens for food altogether. Many animal welfare activists desire to see a complete end to animal exploitation, but feel such demands are impractical in the immediate context, or feel that making such desires public would lessen the cooperation of those involved in systems that rely on the labor of animals. Animal welfare groups sometimes critique those who work exclusively for the elimination of animal exploitation (often termed animal rights groups), and who insist on a shared “rights” philosophy as uncompromising in perspective and thus making it more difficult to get results.<sup>42</sup> Others in the movement argue for the complete *abolition* of animal exploitation, dismissing welfare efforts that only “regulate” harm to animals, or “[substitute] one form of

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<sup>41</sup> I write more about animal welfare in Chapter 4, including a brief history of the antivivisection movement. Theologian Antonia Gorman discusses the compelling connection between Christian atonement theology and the antivivisection movement in her work: Antonia Gorman, "Surrogate Suffering: Paradigms of Sin, Salvation, and Sacrifice within the Vivisection Movement," in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Francione, "Reflections on Tom Regan and the Animal Rights Movement that Once Was," 21. Some animal welfare supporters argue, for example, that focusing on completely abstaining from the use of animals for human purposes intimidates those who are only ready to make small changes in their diets, in their views about animals, and in their support of animal advocacy initiatives.

exploitation for another.”<sup>43</sup> Abolitionist animal rights campaigns emphasize the prohibition of the use of animals rather than the reduction of use, and abolitionist campaigns also seek to be clear and explicit about the intentions, philosophical and ethical commitments, and long term goals of the movement.<sup>44</sup> For example, prominent animal rights philosopher Tom Regan acknowledges the complicated dispute over terminology around animal advocacy. He suggests, in simplified terms, that the “unifying [conviction]” of the movement is that “animals are in cages, and they should not be there,” referring not only to animals in literal cages, but more broadly to animals used by humans for human purposes. For simplicity within the “current debate” in animal advocacy circles, he used “Animal Rights Advocates” to describe anyone with “abolitionist convictions” and “full animal consciousness,” regardless of their particular philosophical and ethical understandings.<sup>45</sup> Although he portrays his language choice as “unifying,” he still limits the “animal rights” activist label to those who share his abolitionist goals.<sup>46</sup> Welfare-focused activists, abolitionist-oriented activists, and those who fall somewhere in between these approaches all fall into the larger category of animal rights activism.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 9-10. The language of “abolition,” most often connected with anti-enslavement work, is controversial, and not used by all animal rights activists. Gary Francione and Tom Regan, key figures in the animal rights movement, both employ abolitionist language, however, and represent an end of the spectrum in animal advocacy. See more on this topic in Corey Lee Wrenn, “Abolitionist Animal Rights: Critical Comparisons and Challenges within the Animal Rights Movement,” *Interface* 4, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>44</sup> Francione, “Reflections on Tom Regan and the Animal Rights Movement that Once Was,” 10.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Regan, *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenges of Animal Rights* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 34.

<sup>46</sup> Other notable abolitionists include Gary L. Francione, Steven Best, and David Nibert. The animal rights movement is discussed more fully in Chapter 4 and expands on Francione’s perspective.

Another primary division in the movement concerns disagreements around *why* animal rights need protecting. Why should humans care about nonhuman animals? What are the theoretical reasons why humans should care about the well-being of nonhuman animals? Peter Singer, who is the most well-known “animal rights” thinker despite his rejection of “rights” language, approaches questions of the place of nonhuman animals from a utilitarian ethics standpoint. Singer does not consider himself particularly passionate about animals, but rather challenges readers to recognize speciesism in their thinking, and an extension of moral concern beyond the human to include nonhuman animals.<sup>47</sup> He argues that the sentience of nonhuman animals should be acknowledged, leading humans to change their treatment of animals.<sup>48</sup> Tom Regan argues that nonhuman animals are “subjects-of-a-life,” a quality that humans and animals share, even while they remain different in many ways.<sup>49</sup> Scholars working from a framework of religion, theology and/or ethics add still more perspectives on *why* animal rights matter. For example, ethicist Clare Palmer argues for a Christian relational ethics of care, drawing on ecofeminist themes and emphasizing human-animal relationships in her theology.<sup>50</sup> These approaches represent just a few of the multiplicity of theoretical framings for animal

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<sup>47</sup> Emily Patterson-Kane, Michael P. Allen, and Jennifer Eadie, *Rethinking the American Animal Rights Movement*, ed. Heather Ann Thompson, *American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Animal sentience and the degree to which various animals are sentient is a frequently discussed aspect of animal rights by Singer and others. Singer, for example, argues that when other animal beings cannot be said to have “interests,” and are not “capable of suffering or experiencing pleasure,” these beings do not require the same protections as animals with clearly identifiable interests. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002 (1975)), 171.

<sup>49</sup> Regan, *Empty Cages*, 49-51.

<sup>50</sup> Clare Palmer, "Animals in Christian Ethics," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2002): 176-77, <https://doi.org/10.1558/ecotheology.v7i2.163>.

rights, and they illustrate some of the most prominent “schools” of animal rights, giving a glimpse into the scope and variety of animal advocacy, and they begin to touch on Christian approaches to animal rights that are meaningful to this dissertation.

With this broad range of perspectives in mind, I establish my research approach. As I seek space for the well-being of individual nonhuman animals within the eco-justice movement of mainline churches, my initial focus is on discovering any strategic entryways for incorporating the moral worth of individual nonhuman animals into the concerns of the eco-justice movement and mainline churches more broadly. I choose, then, to continue to employ the contested language of “animal rights” in this dissertation. The most practical reason for this language choice is that it best reflects the expanse of literature around animal advocacy. When tracing the history of the social movement, “animal rights” seems to be the most commonly and consistently used phrase, across perspectives, used even by those who are clarifying how they do not “fit” ideologically in an animal rights framework, and it is used despite scholars employing the same caveats I now articulate on the complicated nature of such a word choice.<sup>51</sup> “Animal rights” seems to be the best term to most clearly convey the concerns at stake: what rights, freedoms, guarantees for life, safety, and flourishing are given to nonhuman animals? Secondly, the

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<sup>51</sup> Francione, "Reflections on Tom Regan and the Animal Rights Movement that Once Was."; Wrenn, "Abolitionist Animal Rights: Critical Comparisons and Challenges within the Animal Rights Movement." Similarly, some groups label themselves “animal rights” advocacy organizations, while *other* “animal rights” groups feel that these groups are misapplying the term, and that “animal welfare” is a better description. Gary L. Francione, for example, describes some organizations as “*supposedly* ‘animal rights’ [groups]” who “thought of themselves as rights groups,” clearly indicating his opposition to their self-assessment (Francione, 19, emphasis mine.) The confusion and even conflict among the animal advocacy community on how best to describe the work being done by one’s own group or “opposing” groups is another reason to simply use the broad label of “animal rights” in this work. Corey Lee Wrenn, meanwhile, suggests that abolitionism, supported by Francione and others, has failed to obtain significant clout within the animal rights movement, compared with the animal welfare school of thought, although she sees an increasing presence of abolitionist arguments on the internet, broadening its audience.

language of animal rights is commonly employed particularly when contrasting the philosophies of those working to protect individual animals with environmentalists who focus on preservation of species as wholes.<sup>52</sup> Finally, using “rights” language also resonates both with existing areas of justice work in human communities and with developing areas of environmental advocacy.<sup>53</sup>

The debates within the animal rights movement are long-lasting and complex, and although I address these conflicts more thoroughly later in this work, a complete examination of the nuances of the movement is beyond the scope of this work. Using the language of animal rights in its broadest, most inclusive definition, however, serves the purpose of presenting the many facets of the movement for examination. In so doing, I aim to contrast the animal rights movement with the eco-justice movement and draw conclusions to both challenge and improve the claims of both.

### *Anthropocentrism*

The classic definition of anthropocentrism defines the term as the belief that “human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world.”<sup>54</sup> The concept of anthropocentrism is often connected to or rooted in biblical origins, and more specifically

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Peterson gives significant attention to the tensions between the holism perspective of environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott on the one hand, and the animal rights framing of thinkers like Palmer and Regan. Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 12, 24.

<sup>53</sup> For just one example of an explicit connection between human rights work and animal rights, see Tom Sparks, Visa Kurki, and Saskia Stucki, "Editorial: Animal rights: interconnections with human rights and the environment: Animal rights: interconnections with human rights and the environment," *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 11, no. 2 (01 September 2020 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4337/jhre.2020.02.00>, <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/journals/jhre/11-2/jhre.2020.02.00.xml>.

<sup>54</sup> "Anthropocentrism," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism>.

some Jewish and Christian interpretations of biblical texts. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham contends that the concept of dominion drawn from Genesis 1:26-28, a text frequently interpreted from an anthropocentric perspective, was not always understood as “a project humans were commanded to pursue.” He argues, however, that the development of philosophy and theology in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment era led to an understanding of dominion as a “mandate for the progressive exploitation of the resources of creation for the improvement of human life.”<sup>55</sup> In this theological framing, God’s purpose for creation is to serve humanity, because God’s redemptive mission is also for, and *only* for, humanity.<sup>56</sup>

A deep cultural grounding built on anthropocentric views of the world emerges from this theological heritage of dominion. Donna Haraway describes the problematic expression of anthropocentrism as a “culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism,” a fantasy that pretends that humanity can stand outside the “web of interspecies dependencies” that encompass the rest of the earth and its creatures.<sup>57</sup> Anthropocentrism imagines a “Great Divide” in a binary world where humans are on one side and all other beings (such as nonhuman animals) are on the opposite side.<sup>58</sup> Haraway

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<sup>55</sup> Bauckham instead argues that before the Enlightenment era, people simply understood the concept of dominion to give permission for the activities of everyday life like farming, hunting, and fishing. Richard Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation: A Biblical Perspective," in *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation*, ed. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 18.

<sup>56</sup> David Clough, *On Animals: Volume I: Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 12-13.

<sup>57</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* The Great Divide is similar to the neo-Platonic concept of the Great Chain of Being, which imagines a hierarchy of all created beings, with male humans near the top and all nonhuman animals in

calls the worldview of anthropocentrism a myth, a story that human exceptionalism tells about the self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and superiority of bounded individual humans.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Haraway contends that we *are* and *are becoming* kin across species, becoming together in relationship.<sup>60</sup> I join Haraway and others in problematizing the way anthropocentrism falsely separates humans from creation, including nonhuman animals, thriving on false binaries that serve to keep everyone in place.

Several ecowomanist, Black feminist, and ecofeminist scholars have made important challenges to the way some White environmentalists address human-centeredness and anthropocentrism by implying that centering humans is always wrong. Melanie Harris describes eco-womanism as focusing on the intersectional wholeness of Black women, and pushes back against critiques of anthropocentrism, saying that while “some may argue that this is unabashedly anthropocentric,” she instead understands ecowomanism to be “unapologetically for the liberation of African peoples and the wholeness of the earth community.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Sofia Betancourt articulates an “ecowomanist moral anthropology” that “[reclaims] the value of that which is considered human in the work of environmental ethics.”<sup>62</sup> Black feminist philosopher Carol Wayne

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places of lesser value. See Clough’s extensive work on the chain of being concept in Clough, *On Animals: Vol. I*, 57-64.

<sup>59</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-02.

<sup>61</sup> Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 19, footnote 10.

<sup>62</sup> Betancourt notes the push of posthumanism in academia, and offers ecowomanism as a contrasting methodology that insists much work remains to protect the concepts of personhood and human nature in the face of relentless dehumanization of marginalized groups. Sofia Betancourt, *Ecowomanism at the Panamá Canal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), 85.

White notes the “deep interconnectedness among human animals and our kinship with other life forms,” but is careful to reject claims that seek to emphasize that kinship and interconnectedness “by dissolving alterity and assimilating difference” between humans and other creatures.<sup>63</sup> Echoing ecofeminists like Val Plumwood, ecowomanist theologian Christopher Carter expounds on what he describes as the construct of White Western theological anthropology: a dualism that defines the normal and “ideal” human as a White cisgendered heterosexual Christian man constructed against the “other” of the animal.<sup>64</sup> The construction of the human ideal is built in part on the animalization of anything that does not conform to the norm, including some humans.<sup>65</sup> Carter proposes that both animal rights groups and anti-racist activists can attend to their work to avoid *either* decentering the human in a way that leads to blocking historically dehumanized groups of people from a rightful claim to a more inclusive vision of humanity, *or* recentering the human, leaving intact harmful society/nature binaries.<sup>66</sup> He contends that an effective animal rights movement can easily emphasize the “subjective experience of

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<sup>63</sup> Carol Wayne White, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 3, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Carter writes that “if Black bodies, particularly the bodies of Black women, having been cast as the marginalized Others in white American theological anthropology, are free to realize a liberatory selfhood, then freedom for *all* other bodies would follow. As such, my theological anthropology finds its starting point in the theological writing of Black women scholars.” Christopher Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 104.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Carter, “Race, Animals, and a New Vision of the Beloved Community,” in *Animals and Religion*, ed. Aftandilian (New York: Routledge, 2024), 75-76. I engage Carter’s work throughout my dissertation as a primary interlocutor.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

the other than human animal” both without decentering humans and without maintaining a problematic form of anthropocentrism built on colonialism and White supremacy.<sup>67</sup>

Critiques of an unnuanced and careless dismissal of human-centered theotics, like those offered by Harris, Carter, Betancourt, and others, along with a recognition of the importance of racial justice, civil rights, and the environmental justice movement to eco-justice work<sup>68</sup> are helpful guideposts as I challenge anthropocentrism.

Acknowledging these important critiques of the ways in which some scholars, and especially White scholars, talk about “decentering the human,” I frequently employ the phrase “problematic anthropocentrism” or other similar terms to specify that I critique a specific understanding of anthropocentrism which I believe is damaging and in need of deconstruction. I do not argue in favor of conflating differences between humans and animals, or suggest that humans have no unique qualities (although I *do* seek to problematize how we characterize and value said uniqueness.) I believe that people can engage in meaningful, ethical, human-focused work. When ecological frameworks fail to decenter the human enough to make meaningful space for the spiritual and theological claims of nonhuman animals, however, as I argue is the case with the eco-justice movement, those frameworks are employing a problematic anthropocentrism that cannot meet the needs of the global environmental crisis.

### *Ecofeminism*

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>68</sup> I discuss the relationship between the eco-justice movement and the environmental justice movement in chapters 1 and 2.

Ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton describes the aim of ecofeminism as “theoretical, practical, and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature.”<sup>69</sup> Val Plumwood includes in ecofeminism’s framework a demonstration of the interconnection of the domination of women, the domination of nature, and the domination of those viewed as “other.”<sup>70</sup> In their introduction to *Ecotheology: a Christian Conversation*, Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett claim, in fact, that ecofeminism is “the first liberative movement to combine a holistic understanding of human oppression and ecological pollution.”<sup>71</sup> The concept of ecofeminism (the term ecofeminism is attributed to Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974) emerged in the 1970s alongside growing environmental and women’s movements, and continued to develop, with ecofeminist scholars in the seventies, eighties, and nineties producing some of the major theoretical and theological works in the field that continue to shape and influence ecofeminist scholarship today.<sup>72</sup> Ecofeminism thought includes many subfields, including ecofeminist theology, which both critiques patriarchal

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<sup>69</sup> Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, Introductions in Feminist Theology, (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2005), 11.

<sup>70</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 10. Ecofeminism, like ecowomanism critiques anthropocentrism., but has been critiqued for assuming a “universal” women’s experience, or for reflecting primarily an analysis of White women, who have had higher “standing” in western societies. I explore ecofeminism (and critiques of ecofeminism) more in Chapter 5.

<sup>71</sup> Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett, *Ecotheology: a Christian Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 7.

<sup>72</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5. I list here a few major works from this period, in addition to the others I discuss here. I draw on a more extensive set of ecofeminist scholars in Chapter 5. Major works include: Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1988); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1993).

constructions within traditional theologies and works to reconstruct theology with an ecofeminist lens. My own ecofeminist perspective is influenced both by the ecowomanist thinkers previously mentioned, and by several key ecofeminist authors, such as Val Plumwood and Carol Adams.

Australian philosopher Plumwood contributed a significant body of ecofeminist scholarship from the 1970s until her death in 2008. Her work included a detailed critique of anthropocentrism. She described the interconnected domination of women, nature, and the other as a “master model” system that produces harmful dualisms with a master and a subordinated, oppressed other.<sup>73</sup> The task of ecofeminism is to expose and deconstruct these dualisms. Plumwood’s framing of the work of ecofeminism is especially helpful in addressing the problematic anthropocentrism of the eco-justice movement, emphasizing the ways the “master model” encourages an othering and subordination of nonhuman animals.

While Plumwood’s ecofeminism (discussed more fully in Chapter 5) gives ample space to reflect on nonhuman animals and their connection to the oppression of women, Carol Adam’s ecofeminism makes nonhuman animals the centerpiece of her work. In her pivotal 1990 work *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, scholar-activist Adams argues that one cannot attend to feminist concerns without attending to animal concerns and vice versa, and her purpose is to make the links between violence against women and violence against animals obvious and unavoidable.<sup>74</sup> Cultivating a history of feminist-vegetarian protest across the decades, Adams notes that “meat eating is an integral part of male

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<sup>73</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 5, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, [Twentieth anniversary edition], xxxiv.

dominance”<sup>75</sup> and that vegetarianism is a rejection not only of “meat-eating society,” but also of the whole system of patriarchy.<sup>76</sup> Adams’ work has had significant impact within ecofeminism, increasing the consideration of nonhuman animals in ecofeminist scholarship and activism. I continue to explore the meaning of eco-feminism in Chapter 5, where I explore ecofeminist care ethics, and as I turn now to examine my methodological commitments for this project.

### Methodology

I engage an ecofeminist lens to reveal problematic aspects of the eco-justice movement and to offer corrective action. As mentioned above, eco-feminist perspectives seek to expose and dismantle problematic dualisms, approaching relationships with nonhuman animals through a complex web of kinship, and through a framework that can move beyond the species versus individual animals tensions that often surface at the juncture of environmental social theories and animal rights movements. In addition to the theoretical strength of ecofeminist thought as a foundation for my work, ecofeminist methodologies also enhance my research. My research seeks to decenter the human and elevate the theoethical and moral standing of nonhuman animals within the eco-justice movement. Yet, nonhuman animals cannot voice their own concerns and perspectives in ways that humans can readily understand. As I attempt to center nonhuman animals, then, I engage a feminist methodological approach that reminds me of the power differential

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 168.

between me and the animals of whom I write, using care as I attempt to speak as an advocate for, yet not in place of, nonhuman animals.<sup>77</sup>

As I advocate for nonhuman animals, I employ an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach, resonating with the work of Donna Haraway, who adeptly engages in multiple fields in her research in a deeply interwoven way. Haraway explicitly argues for careful consideration of who we “think with.”<sup>78</sup> Her questions are helpful, particularly as I challenge problematic concepts of anthropocentrism: “What happens when ideas like “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable?”<sup>79</sup> As I pursue the interests of individual animals, I do so with a commitment to thinking about all creatures in a web of kinship, and thinking across the lines of disciplinary approaches.

I also resonate with the engaged activism commitments of Carol J. Adams, who writes to “[expose] problems, but also [to offer] solutions,” by empowering resistance.<sup>80</sup> She emphasizes that her work emerges from her activism: “[*The Sexual Politics of Meat*] evolved from an activist. I am an activist immersed in theory to be sure, but I am still an activist, with all the war wounds.”<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere she describes her work as engaged theory,

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<sup>77</sup> Dána-Ain Davis Davis and Christa Craven, *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), 69, 84, 94.

<sup>78</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>80</sup> Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, [Twentieth anniversary edition], xvi.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.

saying, “Engaged theory makes change possible.”<sup>82</sup> I share her commitment to change-making engaged theory.

In addition to engaging with existing scholarship and conversation partners as described earlier, I employ the specific qualitative tools of archival research and targeted interviews aimed at building oral histories as primary methodological tools. Although both archival research and oral histories are widely used by many researchers, these approaches especially express my ecofeminist commitments. My dissertation is not primarily ethnographic, but my research values resonate with a definition of feminist ethnography given by Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven, in that my research employs “a feminist sensibility and commitment to paying attention to marginality and power differentials.”<sup>83</sup> I seek to attend to power differentials by conducting interviews not only with agency heads and department directors who might reflect a more official accounting of denominational actions, but also with program staff and with activists from The UMC and its ecumenical partners who are working outside of denominational employment and outside of official denominational organizations. While many of the published voices of the early eco-justice movement are men, and the highest UMC agency staff positions were filled by men, the voices of women on agency staff, working as lay activists, or contributing writings about eco-justice are equally as important. I utilize a methodology

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<sup>82</sup> Carol J. Adams, "What Came Before The Sexual Politics of Meat: The Activist Roots of a Critical Theory," in *Species Matters* (2011), 134. Feminist philosopher Ann Garry defines engaged theory as a multidisciplinary methodological approach that is “intended to support social change directly or indirectly.” Ann Garry, "Intersections, Social Change, and "Engaged" Theories: Implications of North American Feminism," *Pacific and American Studies* 8 (2008): 99.

<sup>83</sup> Davis and Craven, *Feminist Ethnography*, 12.

that seeks to draw out knowledge and document perspectives that might otherwise be forgotten.

In *Longing for Running Water*, ecofeminist philosopher Ivone Gebara writes that androcentric and anthropocentric epistemologies offer what they pretend is the only way of knowing and experiencing reality, and yet truly offer knowledge only from male and human perspectives. In contrast, ecofeminist epistemologies do not claim to be “right,” but instead engage in the pursuit of wisdom alongside “the community of all living beings.”<sup>84</sup> My interviews work toward producing oral histories of the eco-justice movement, yielding valuable knowledge that fills in gaps in a developing movement and elevating narratives not expressed elsewhere. Oral histories provide first-person accounts to elevate perspectives and details not considered important by existing literature, and to disrupt published narratives that gloss over important points of view. Anthropologist Tracy Fisher writes that feminist oral history projects are “marked by their connection to justice-based visions for transformation” that places value on knowledge that can be overlooked by other research methods.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Kathryn Anderson et al. argue that oral histories allow for new stories to emerge that challenge existing dominant narratives, sometimes even narratives deemed “official,” about a particular topic.<sup>86</sup> My methodology seeks to craft a more complete portrait of the eco-justice movement, to better critique and strengthen it for the future.

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<sup>84</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 22-23.

<sup>85</sup> As quoted in Davis and Craven, *Feminist Ethnography*, 108.

<sup>86</sup> Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3674961>

My extensive archival research also enables me not only to see the “finished products” of policy decisions and denominational legislation, but to better understand the steps leading to decisions, glimpses of the paths and plans that did not come to fruition, and the agents who shaped decision-making who may not have been at the top of denominational hierarchies. I have extensively examined primary source material from the late 1960s through the present from official bodies and caucus groups of The United Methodist Church, including documents from General Conference gatherings, from the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), from caucus groups like the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) and the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches (EJWG).<sup>87</sup> These documents help me construct a more thorough history of the eco-justice movement and the movement’s framing strategies and key concepts since primary documents like pamphlets, mailings, meeting agendas and minutes, and planning notes are valuable sources of information about the movement’s theology, values, and goals. Archival documents help me track conversations taking place in the emerging eco-justice movement even if these topics were not reflected in official denominational polity. Including such archival research helps me center narratives otherwise excluded from official histories.

I interviewed twelve stakeholders in the eco-justice movement, and I draw on these interviews throughout this dissertation. As my previous archival research revealed an inconsistent and incomplete documentation of the eco-justice movement at work within The UMC, interviews with key players have provided an important supplement to

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<sup>87</sup> The Eco-justice Working Group is now known as Creation Justice Ministries, a change made in 2013 that reflects a change in its relationship to the National Council of Churches USA. The shift was made primarily for financial reasons. Avery Davis Lamb, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, May 22, 2024.

the available literature in this area. My interviews build oral histories, yielding valuable knowledge that fills in gaps in a developing movement. Conducting interviews helps me answer questions related to the eco-justice framework's understanding of nonhuman animals, a matter mostly unaddressed elsewhere. In previous archival research, for example, I found that some small eco-focused caucus groups in The UMC advocated (unsuccessfully) for changes to official United Methodist language on animals.<sup>88</sup> Interviews assist me in tracking what was behind both the suggested legislation and the nonsupport of such endeavors by the denomination. Interviews for this project include both current and former agency staff (both executive and program staff), board members, and consultants at the General Board of Church and Society and current and former staff of the Eco-justice Working Group.

### Why the UMC?

As mentioned, I situate my research within the context of The United Methodist Church. I choose this particular focus for several reasons. First, The UMC was one of many ecumenical partners in the development of the eco-justice movement, working alongside other denominations, and many of the early movement leaders were United Methodist. The UMC provided many financial, material, and personnel resources toward the establishment of eco-justice ministries. During a season when most denominations were only able to provide part-time staff attention to environmentalism, The UMC had *at least* one full-time staff person dedicated to eco-justice work, and sometimes multiple

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<sup>88</sup> My previous archival research is published in an article, "'The Natural World': An Eco-Justice Case Study, 1972–1992." *Methodist History* 62, no. 1 (2024): 1-38.

staff working on environmental concerns.<sup>89</sup> The intentional staffing and support of the environmental movement by The UMC makes the denomination a fruitful choice for focused research.

Second, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, considered the theological place of nonhuman animals in his writings. In an entire sermon devoted to nonhuman animals, for example, Wesley speculated that “brute creation” would be granted eternal reward in the new creation, in part to compensate for the suffering they endure at the hands of humans in their earthly lives.<sup>90</sup> Wesley regularly adopted a vegetarian diet, and although he espoused health-related reasons for his choices, his abstaining from eating animals set him apart from his theological peers and drew attention to his practices.<sup>91</sup> Wesley’s attention to animals in turn led to Methodist involvement in the antivivisection movement in the nineteenth century, a component of a Methodist theoethical heritage of social witness.<sup>92</sup> The Wesleyan heritage of theological attention to animals makes the denomination a strong choice for a research context.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Jaydee Hanson, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, June 7, 2024; Paz Artaza-Regan, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, May 22 2024.

<sup>90</sup> "The General Deliverance," *The Sermons of John Wesley, 1785*, accessed 29 December 2025, <https://www.wordsofjesus.com/libtext.cfm?srm=60>. Wesley wrote about animals and the value of creation beyond the human in other sermons as well, such as “The New Creation.” *The Sermons of John Wesley, 1785*, accessed 29 December 2025, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-64-the-new-creation/>.

<sup>91</sup> David Clough, *Early Methodists and Other Animals: Animal Welfare as an Evangelical Issue, The 2015 Fernley Hartley Lecture* (University of Chester 2015), Vimeo Video. I explore the antivivisection movement more in Chapter 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> In Chapter 4, I draw on the work of theologian Christopher Carter and David Clough, both Methodists, and part of an enduring Wesleyan contribution to animal ethics. I, too, am shaped by my context in the Wesleyan tradition, and offer my scholarship to this tradition of social witness.

Most importantly, the UMC has a rich yet conflicted and contested history of espousing liberal values and theological claims and working for justice for marginalized groups, both through official denominational actions and through the longstanding efforts of unofficial advocacy groups. The UMC has consistently wrestled with matters of inclusion, reckoning with racism both within the institutional church and in society, advocating for the rights of women around the globe, and engaging in a decades-long battle centered on human sexuality and the place of LGBTQ+ persons within the church.<sup>94</sup> The conflict over the inclusion (or exclusion) of queer persons from full participation in The UMC (including membership, ordination, and marriage) resulted in a schism in 2022 with the formation of the conservative Global Methodist Church, a breakoff from The United Methodist Church. The persistent focus and ongoing conflict in The UMC on matters of human sexuality has considerably influenced what remaining social issues have received the denomination's time, attention, and funding. It is yet unclear how this 2022 schism will reshape social justice priorities in the coming decades of The UMC. Still, this dissertation enters an expanding frontier that calls for space for a range of those who are "othered," including nonhuman animals, in the priorities of the church, a call that is consistent with the long history of liberal values and theology, and justice-seeking.

### Researcher Positionality

In addition to the contributions my dissertation makes to the interdisciplinary areas I have already described, I also engage in this research because of personal

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<sup>94</sup> See Ashley Boggan, *Entangled: A History of American Methodism, Politics, and Sexuality* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018).

experiences which both compel me to undertake this work and provide knowledge and insight valuable to my study. For example, alongside the reasons previously outlined, I also choose The UMC context for research because of access and familiarity. I am a United Methodist clergyperson and have been a practicing member of The UMC for my entire life. The UMC is the primary context that formed me ethically and spiritually. My insider positioning within The UMC makes me well-suited to research the denomination's environmental commitments; I have connections within The UMC that ease my work. My status as a UMC clergyperson has assisted me in sourcing materials and connecting with interview subjects. More specifically, I have previously served on the board of directors of the General Board of Church and Society,<sup>95</sup> and have remained involved in GBCS's work in a variety of ways as an individual, as well as with congregations I have served as pastor, and through membership in UMC regional bodies affiliated with GBCS.<sup>96</sup> I have preexisting collegial relationships with some of my interviewees because of my work with GBCS. All these connections can serve to benefit and strengthen my work. I am mindful, at the same time, of how my preexisting familiarity with The UMC, its leadership, and its related organization could bias my research, encouraging me to be less critical of work in which colleagues or I played a role, or leading me to assume I understand unstated motivations for actions and decisions.

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<sup>95</sup> I was a board member from 2000-2008, and from 2012-2016. During this time, I was a member of the Economic and Environmental Justice Work Area, which directly addressed some of the legislation and polity described in this dissertation. GBCS also has a primary responsibility for carrying out the Social Principles in its work, making this agency's actions pertinent to my research.

<sup>96</sup> Regional UMC areas, called Annual Conferences, have various committees that relate directly to the work of GBCS. In my region, the Upper New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, I have served both on the Social Holiness team and the Creation Justice team, both of which relate to GBCS.

Aware of these tensions, I seek to capitalize on the benefits of my connections, while engaging in research practices that reveal and lessen the impact of biases I might bring to my work.

I am also a stakeholder in the animal rights/animal advocacy movement. I adopted a vegetarian diet as a teenager, and then a vegan diet as an adult. I have volunteered with vegan advocacy groups, and both completed a learning fellowship with and been employed by a Christian organization, CreatureKind, that works for liberation “for animals, people, and the earth.” As part of my work with CreatureKind, I have acted as a coach and worked on curriculum to support the learning of others seeking to become volunteer or professional advocates for nonhuman animals from a faith-based perspective. As mentioned above, I see myself as a scholar-activist, with specific commitments to nonhuman animals and a focus on working for change for the spiritual and moral place of nonhuman animals within both faith communities and the larger society. My positioning both in The UMC and in the activist world of animal advocacy strengthens my research, while at the same time, I seek to ensure that a more comprehensive story of eco-justice in The UMC emerges and to encourage more nuanced discussion of the inclusion of non-human animals in any vision of eco-justice. Drawing on my experiences I hope to contribute to the potential for a revitalized eco-justice ethic that dynamically encompasses nonhuman animals, and by the possibilities for the social visioning capabilities of the churches and denominations.

### Summary of Chapters

In this dissertation, I first seek to show that there is a problematic lacuna in the eco-justice movement by examining and analyzing the institutional eco-justice framework employed by leaders and activists in The UMC from several disciplinary perspectives. Building on that understanding and history, I offer correctives and alternative vision that not only better includes the moral and spiritual significance of nonhuman animals in the movement, but also asks deeper questions about the ability of mainline churches to lead significant social change. The chapters of this work are organized, then, to begin with the problems in eco-justice ideology, move to a supporting case study, and then broaden to interdisciplinary perspectives that shape my response. In Chapter 1, I begin with a more thorough examination of the eco-justice movement, engaging in an exploration of the small but significant scholarship of the movement. I trace the origins of the eco-justice movement, outline key ethical and theological themes, and examine the scholarly work of both eco-justice leadership and movement outsiders who have reflected on the work of eco-justice. I assess both the strengths and weaknesses of eco-justice theoethics, including highlighting discrepancies between expressed tenets and actual practices.

As I begin to illustrate the anthropocentrism existent in eco-justice theology and activism, I discuss the relationships between the eco-justice movement, the movement's commitment to racial justice, and the emergence of the environmental justice movement. As the eco-justice movement prioritized which among its many justice goals to pursue, an important emphasis on racial justice made clear eco-justice's tendency toward a human-centered focus.

Finally, I survey how eco-justice activists and movement leaders speak and write about nonhuman animals. In my reading to date, eco-justice literature and activism spends little time addressing the moral value of nonhuman animals, and the scant commentary that does exist pertains almost exclusively to discussion of species of animals. Despite some broad and sweeping assertions about valuing the entire creation, in my assessment the eco-justice movement overlooks nonhuman animals, defaulting to a problematic anthropocentrism.

After considering the theoretical foundations of the eco-justice movement, I turn in Chapter 2 to the case study of eco-justice in The UMC as a study of the movement in practice. My work focuses on major movements in the denomination starting from the 1968 creation of the denomination out of predecessor bodies, a time at which the Social Principles were commissioned and environmental concerns were first becoming an official part of UMC polity, through The UMC's adoption of a revised Social Principles at the 2020 session of the General Conference.<sup>97</sup> Reviewing this fifty year period, I examine The UMC's environmental polity and activism from several angles. I review legislative actions and perspectives offered at General Conference sessions in order to detail the actions of the General Board of Church and Society connected to ecological concerns. I share rich narratives collected from several interviews with stakeholders in the eco-justice movement, including GBCS staff, caucus leaders, and denominational activists. Finally, I explore the impact of one caucus, the Methodist Federation for Social

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<sup>97</sup> Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 session of General Conference was postponed. The session was finally held in the spring of 2024 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Because of a ruling of the Judicial Council, the top legal body of The UMC, the postponed General Conference session in held 2024 was still designated as the "2020 General Conference."

Action (MFSA), in depth, looking for its strategic approaches to influencing denominational change. MFSA's long history of justice work, overlapping with the timeframe of the eco-justice movement, make it an ideal caucus for thorough examination. Through these areas of inquiry into the denomination, I aim to trace the presence and *absence* of attention to non-human animals in the denomination's values and actions.<sup>98</sup>

In Chapter 3, I explore The UMC in the context of the larger processes and challenges of institutional and denominational change. Looking at sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's use of the concept of *habitus*, and engaging with interpreters of his work, I consider when and how denominations undergo or even lead in social change.<sup>99</sup> Engaging with Jane Ellen Nickell and Willis Jenkins and their use of Pierre Bourdieu's work, I critique the way The UMC maintains its power and privilege, defaulting to existing polity positions in the face of opposition and pushes for change. Theologians like Jennifer Ayers and Henrik Pieterse, and ethicists like Cynthia Moe-Lobeda argue that the theoethical foundations of institutions and movements are significant, offering a motivation for social change (or resistance to change).<sup>100</sup> Using their scholarship, I ask how a denomination might lean on its theoethical identity to better translate its stated

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<sup>98</sup> I do not examine the work of local congregations in seeking to implement an eco-justice ethic, or to use and respond to denominational materials and programs on eco-justice concerns or the Social Principles more broadly. Though exploration of localized environmentalism efforts is a compelling topic, it is outside the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>99</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>100</sup> Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move*; Hendrik R. Pieterse, "In Praise of Bureaucracy: Mission, Structure, and Renewal in The United Methodist Church," *Occasional Papers: Preparing a New Generation of Christian Leaders* 103, no. December 2010 (2010); Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

values into action. I then turn to United Methodist scholars like Tipton, Stephens, and Yrigoyen Jr., McEllhenney, and Rowe to provide valuable contextual insights on social change in Methodist history, practice, and Wesleyan theoethics, noting shifts and challenges from liberation and inclusion movements that have impacted an eco-justice framework.<sup>101</sup> I ask questions about the impact of individual, small group, and caucus efforts in advocating for social change, concluding that despite the potential magnitude of resistance to reform in denominational structures, social change remains possible. Building on the insights of these conversation partners, I discuss both the limitations and potentials of a reconstructed eco-justice framework in mainline churches.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the outside movement that influenced many of those proposing action by The UMC; it begins with a brief history of the animal rights movement, focusing on its key arguments and advocacy strategies, and attending to challenging aspects of animal rights advocacy that make the movement a challenging partner for justice work. Drawing on ecofeminist and black feminist analyses, I critique several existing streams of animal rights advocacy, pointing out failures of recognizing and honoring intersectionality, and demonstrating the frequent inadequacies of attempts to connect animal rights to other justice issues. Although some animal rights activists insist their approach is and has always been intersectional, many BIPOC scholars in the animal advocacy movement, such as A. Breeze Harper and Christopher Carter, disagree.<sup>102</sup> Here, the eco-justice movement has a better record of understanding and

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<sup>101</sup> Charles Yrigoyen Jr, John G. McEllhenney, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *United Methodism at Forty: looking back, looking forward* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008); Tipton, *Public Pulpits*; Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*.

<sup>102</sup> For just two of many possible examples of this critique, see A. Breeze Harper, "Connections: Speciesism, Racism, and Whiteness as the Norm," in *Sister Species: Women, Animals, and Social Justice*,

acting on interrelated matters of racial justice and oppression, even while it fails to adequately address nonhuman animals. I engage with literature from the animal rights movement to identity movement strategies, highlighting influential scholars and activists like environmental lawyer Cass R. Sunstein, animal rights philosopher Cora Diamond, and animal abolitionist philosopher-activist Tom Regan.<sup>103</sup> I contrast animal rights theory with the environmental framework of ecological holism, a perspective advocated by scholars like philosophers Holmes Rolston III and J. Baird Callicott.<sup>104</sup> While animal rights activists advocate for individual animal subjects, holism centers on the whole biotic community, subsuming the individual's needs for the sake of the good of the ecosystem, an approach I challenge through engagement with ecofeminists like Anna Peterson and ecofeminist philosopher Marti Kheel.<sup>105</sup> I demonstrate connections between the eco-justice movement and holist philosophy, suggesting a critical disconnect between the holist framework and animal rights advocacy. Turning to small field of Christian animal advocacy, I explore potential pathways for reconciliation between holism and animal rights. After briefly examining more conservative and evangelical approaches to animal rights, I then shift my focus to theologians like Christopher Carter and David

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ed. Lisa Kemmerer (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 75-76; Carter, "Race, Animals, and a New Vision," 77-79.

<sup>103</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, "Introduction: What Are Animal Rights?," in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," *ibid.*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>104</sup> J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Holmes Rolston III, "Duties to Animals, Plants, Species, and Ecosystems: Challenges for Christians," in *Eco-justice: The Unfinished Journey*, ed. William E. Gibson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*.

Clough, who employ theoethical approaches to unravel problematic interpretations of human/animal binaries. Without collapsing differences from humans, they use theological framing to value the moral worth of animal lives.<sup>106</sup> I use their work as examples of theocentric animal ethics that fit well with the intersectional approach of the eco-justice movement.

Chapter 5 engages an ecofeminist lens to explore possibilities for an eco-justice theoethic that can embrace the best of ecological holism and animal rights philosophies. I explore several facets of ecofeminist thought, especially ecofeminist care ethics, bringing ecofeminist theory and methodology into conversation both with the problematic anthropocentrism of the eco-justice movement, and with larger questions about the moral consideration of nonhuman animals and how constructions of the “Other” can be transformed by a feminist care ethic. Plumwood and Haraway write about the importance of deconstructing dualisms, and the decolonial ecofeminist scholarship of Aph and Syl Ko connects dismantling dualisms to challenging the too often narrow focus of animal rights.<sup>107</sup> Scholar-activists like Adams and critical ecofeminist theorist Greta Gaard serve as conversation partners to explore denominational and social change.<sup>108</sup> Finally, I draw on Anna Peterson and Marti Kheel to seek out a reformed ecological holism that considers the subjectivity of individual animals. I consider how a thoughtful decentering of the human with an ecofeminist care ethic can create space for inclusion and valuing of

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<sup>106</sup> Clough, *On Animals: Vol. I*; David Clough, *On Animals: Volume II: Theological Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Clough is also a clergy person in the British Methodist Church and has sometimes written particularly for Methodist audiences. Clough is also the founder of CreatureKind, and Carter previously served on the board of directors of CreatureKind.

<sup>107</sup> Ko and Ko, *Aphro-ism*.

<sup>108</sup> Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

the spiritual and theological place of nonhuman animals in the ethical framework of mainline denominations like The United Methodist Church.

In the Conclusion, I make my final case for why a stronger eco-justice theoethic matters. In the contemporary context of the United States, in a political climate where demonization of the Other is a strategic approach of the federal government with devastating consequences for people, animals, and the earth, offering an alternative way of valuing earth others is imperative work, in which mainline denominations can play an important role.<sup>109</sup> I argue that raising the status of nonhuman animals in denominational polity and related social justice activism strengthens the ability of the church to champion the moral worth of *all* creation across the institution, making for a more just church. Understanding the sacred worth of all and *each* earth other is necessary work, equipping us to push beyond our human-centric worldviews to attend to our entangled world in peril.

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<sup>109</sup> The language of “earth others” is drawn from Val Plumwood’s work. See her use of “earth others” in relationship to the ecofeminist practice of transspecies listening in Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 137-40. I explore ecofeminist ways of listening to earth others in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ECO-JUSTICE MOVEMENT  
ORIGINS, THEOLOGY, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE,  
AND NONHUMAN ANIMALS

Eco-justice is the “intersection of ecological and economic justice ... [eco-justice is] very human-centered, very ‘how do we lift up the issues that impact the human community that are environmental and economic.’” – Paz Artaza-Regan, former Program Director for Environmental Justice, General Board of Church and Society<sup>1</sup>

The word ‘eco-justice’ “doesn’t capture the whole kit and caboodle of what we’re called to do. I know words have meaning and I think it is important not to get stuck in something but to continue to find many words to describe one thing. You have to use different words to flesh out a concept, like teaching new vocab words to kids, so that the concept doesn’t lose meaning over time. What the concept of eco-justice was initially trying to articulate now requires so much more vocabulary. There’s so much to unpack.” – Cassandra Carmichael, former Eco-justice Program director, National Council of Churches, current executive director, National Religious Partnership for the Environment<sup>2</sup>

Eco-justice is “one way of putting together the human face and the rest of God’s creation in one package.” – Jaydee Hanson, former Assistant General Secretary, General Board of Church and Society<sup>3</sup>

In the introductory chapter, I briefly described the eco-justice movement, a primarily Christian response to environmental concerns emerging among mainline Protestant groups in the 1970s. In this chapter, I probe the claims of the eco-justice movement more fully, through an exploration of the movement’s history, key concepts,

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<sup>1</sup> Paz Artaza-Regan, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, May 22, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Cassandra Carmichael, interview by Beth Quick, Telephone, July 9, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Jaydee Hanson, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, June 7, 2024.

and scholarly work. Beyond simply recapitulating the themes of an eco-justice framework, I outline both some of the weaknesses of and the unfulfilled potential of eco-justice ethics. Eco-justice theoethics are broadly intersectional and ambitious in their scope. The eco-justice movement claims affinity with many justice issues, and this broad vision can both create expectations that one movement cannot fully meet, *and* it can create ample room for refocusing and reconnecting where there are overlooked and unmet goals of the movement. I highlight both important theoethical tenets of the eco-justice frame and begin to demonstrate gaps between claims and practices.

Seeking the sources of dissonance in the movement's ideals and values, I explore the relationship between the eco-justice movement and the environmental justice movement. I argue that the emergence of the eco-justice movement as a contemporary with the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the subsequent developing anti-toxics and environmental justice movements shaped how eco-justice leaders articulated eco-justice priorities. Eco-justice pioneers emphasized human-focused aspects of eco-justice to better align with the important concurrent work of economic and racial justice.<sup>4</sup> As a result, I contend, some of the goals of eco-justice to embody a non-anthropocentric theoethic were diminished, and partnerships with groups focusing on human-centered environmental concerns took more of the movement's attention and energy.

Finally, although it is often not a central focus in the movement, for this study, I attend closely to eco-justice statements about nonhuman animals. What does the eco-

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<sup>4</sup> Although the eco-justice movement emphasizes economic justice, my primary concern in this chapter is addressing how eco-justice's emphasis on racial justice shapes eco-justice's attention to human-centered ecological concerns. I do mention the eco-justice movement's focus on economic justice throughout Chapters 1 and 2, but my engagement is incidental, arising only as it relates to the anthropocentric focus of the movement.

justice movement say, both directly and indirectly, about the place of animals in its theology? Thus, I search for the broad ways that engagements with animals show up, focus on any points of disconnection, looking for connections or fissures between more specific engagements with nonhuman animals and broader statements animals in eco-justice literature. In my analysis, several patterns emerge in eco-justice literature: nonhuman animals are mentioned only as species; they are mentioned mostly alongside plants or even with the lands of the earth more generally; and attention given to actual specific animals is dismissed as a peripheral concern. By thoroughly engaging with the stated purpose, vision, theology, and ethics of eco-justice, I lay the groundwork for a case study of The UMC eco-justice movement, and I enable an assessment of where eco-justice's inconsistencies in addressing non-human animals leads to unrealized promise and potentials in the eco-justice movement.

Throughout this chapter and the next chapter's study, I incorporate findings from a series of oral history interviews I conducted. Over the course of eighteen months, I interviewed twelve key figures in The United Methodist and ecumenical eco-justice movement. The respondents include past and present General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and denominational staff members, past and present ecumenical eco-justice staffers, volunteer activists, and caucus group leaders. I asked open-ended questions of my subjects and responded with follow-up questions depending on the direction of their initial responses. For all interviewees, I asked them to share their understanding of the concept of eco-justice, as reflected in the chapter's opening quotations, and how the term differs from the broader concept of environmentalism or Christian environmentalism. I enquired about ecumenical and intradenominational

partnerships, and any other affinity groups that worked together on eco-justice concerns. I encouraged interviewees to describe both obstacles to completing an eco-justice agenda, and achievements or successes of note. I also asked about their understanding of eco-justice's role in advocating for non-human animals, and asked them to describe any advocacy actions in which they had engaged in the general area of animal rights. Their responses provided me with rich details that helped me better understand the archival material I had reviewed and the decisions being made at General Conference, at GBCS, and in the various groups working on the eco-justice agenda.

### Eco-justice: Origins

To explain the emergence of the eco-justice approach to Christian environmentalism, it is helpful to first examine its historical context. Many sociocultural factors enabled the eco-justice movement's rise. I mention some context of the movement in the introduction, like the first Earth Day in 1970. Legal scholar and eco-justice activist J. Ronald Engel suggests that the birth of the eco-justice movement was contingent on its context in time, coming to life in the midst of a season of "immense theological creativity," and strongly supported by the ecumenical movement.<sup>5</sup> At the 1961 New Delhi gathering of the World Council of Churches, Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, a member of the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order, contended that a theology of redemption must be accompanied by a theology of creation that tends to social issues like

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<sup>5</sup> J. Ronald Engel, "Democracy, Christianity, Ecology: A Twenty-First Century Agenda for Eco-Theology," *CrossCurrents* 61, no. 2 (2011): 7, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.drew.edu/stable/24461941>.

hunger, war, and ecology, as a catalyst for eco-justice.<sup>6</sup> Finnish theologian Panu Pihkala describes Sittler as a “pioneer in ecotheology,” noting his decades of work on theology and nature that preceded a wider spread of ecological inquiry in theological circles.<sup>7</sup> In his WCC keynote address, Sittler called for “an environmental ecumenism,” arguing that caring for the earth was a way to demonstrate the unity of the church, a key aim of the WCC.<sup>8</sup> This period of “immense theological creativity” was further stimulated by historian Lynn White Jr.’s 1967 essay titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” a short article linking environmental damage and problematic Christian theology. This inspired a large response, some of it soul-searching, both in terms of thinking about Christian theology and about taking action in response.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, an eco-justice theological and ethical framework began to take shape in the 1970s as parts of U.S. society and the wider international society started to reckon with the concept of nature’s limits - a recognition by some that increasing population and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 217. The World Council of Churches is a global ecumenical body created by the approval of 100+ Christian communions in 1937-1938, official established in 1948 following World War II. The WCC’s stated goal is strengthening Christian Unity. “What is the World Council of Churches?” <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc>, accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Panu Pihkala, "Rediscovery of Early Twentieth-Century Ecotheology," 2, no. 1: 277, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/opth-2016-0023>. Sittler began writing about ecotheology in the 1950s, articulating a “theology of place” and stressing the interdependent relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Sittler also inspired the convening of the Faith-Man-Nature Group in 1963, one of the first ecotheology-focused groups in North America, supported by the National Council of Churches and led by early environmentalist Philip Joranson. Philip N. Joranson, "The Faith-Man-Nature Group and a Religious Environmental Ethic," *Zygon* 12, 2, no. June (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967 1967). White Jr. is certainly not the first to connect religion and the environment. For example, Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote about environmentalism and humanity’s broken relationship with nature that culminated in his 1968 work *Man and Nature*. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968).

production could not continue unabated without devastating consequences.<sup>10</sup> In 1972, a group of scholars and business leaders called The Club of Rome published “The Limits to Growth” report, a computer-simulated projection of the potentially catastrophic results of continuing to use the earth’s resources in an unchecked manner.<sup>11</sup> According to Indian theologian George Zachariah, the 1972 “Limits to Growth” report, along with emerging social movements related to race, gender, and colonialism in the 1970s and 80s, deeply impacted the ecumenical movement, leading to the establishment of organizations and events built around ecology and sustainability, such as the 1979 World Conference on Faith, Science, and the Future held in Boston.<sup>12</sup> In response to the bleak picture offered by *Limits to Growth*, for example, the National Council of Churches began producing resources with a more hopeful, theologically grounded vision of restored ecological future.<sup>13</sup>

Although there is no “official” beginning to the eco-justice movement, in addition to the growing understanding of the dangers of an “unlimited growth” mindset and of the

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<sup>10</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 79; The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Dana K. Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant: The Eco-Justice Movement as Practical Theology" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1993), 10, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304091484> (T32238). The “Limits to Growth” marked an intense concern about the world’s expanding population, although, as Laurel Kearns notes, scrutiny of over-population often failed to attend to the hugely disproportionate consumption of resources between developing countries and the resource-gobbling industrialized nations like the United States. Laurel Kearns, "The Context of Eco-theology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (2004), 479-80.

<sup>12</sup> George Zachariah, "Eco-justice Reformation: Re-imagining Advocacy by Mainline Protestant Organizations," *Consensus* 38, no. 2 (2017): 2-3, 7, <https://doi.org/10.51644/BNTA3052>.

<sup>13</sup> Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant," 12. The World Council of Churches also continued to play a role with its thematic focus on “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation,” which I discuss later in this chapter.

environmental degradation from pollution, activists sought to respond to concerns about whether environmentalism supported or detracted from Civil Rights work on racial justice. According to Gibson's account, American Baptist staff members Richard Jones and Owen D. Owens chose the term "eco-justice" intentionally in answer to challenges voiced by Black church leaders and other activists that the emerging environmental movement would draw focus away from the struggle for racial justice. Environmentalist Barry Commoner, for example, argued that some people found environmentalism an "irrelevant diversion from the plight" of racial justice, pointing to a 1970 Earth Week event where students buried a new car, an act meant to symbolize "environmental rebelling."<sup>14</sup> Black students, however, protested the event, saying the money to buy the car would have been better spent on poor Black communities.<sup>15</sup> Some people critiqued environmentalists for being unable to see connections between protecting wilderness lands and civil rights work.<sup>16</sup>

With the word "eco-justice," Jones and Owens meant to illustrate that not only were environmentalism and social justice *not* in conflict, but that ecology and justice were in fact inseparable.<sup>17</sup> Owens penned a theological essay, expanding on the connections between ecology, economics, and justice, providing one of the first

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<sup>14</sup> Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (Alfred, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 207.

<sup>15</sup> Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant," 44.

<sup>16</sup> James Noel Smith, *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America: An Exploration of Conflict and Concord among Those Who Seek Environmental Quality and Those Who Seek Social Justice* (Washington, DC: The Conservation Foundation, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> William E. Gibson, "Eco-justice: New perspective for a time of turning," in *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, ecology & justice*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1985), 23.

articulations of what would become eco-justice theology.<sup>18</sup> The foundation of the concept of eco-justice cannot be separated from eco-justice's direct connection with and response to concerns about attention to race, economics, racism, and connecting environmental activism to Civil Rights work. The movement's attention to racial justice was and is an important factor shaping the theology and practice of eco-justice.<sup>19</sup>

The eco-justice framework functioned comfortably within institutional settings, and the movement began to thrive within the context of the ecumenical partnerships, forged around newly developing denominational eco-advocacy. Eco-justice work quickly found an institutional home. In 1973, the Eco-justice Project and Network was established at Cornell University.<sup>20</sup> The Eco-justice Project developed as a program of the United Ministries in Higher Education, an ecumenical partnership for campus ministries in New York State.<sup>21</sup> Gibson, an ordained Presbyterian clergyperson, working closely with Dieter Hessel (also a Presbyterian clergyperson), and supported in part by United Methodist funding, and by the campus ministry network, worked to share the eco-

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<sup>18</sup> American Baptist Home Mission Society and Owen D. Owens, *Salvation and Ecology: Report of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society* (Valley Forge, PA, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> The eco-justice movement, particularly in the early years, especially focused its anti-racist work on anti-Black racism, responding to the U.S. Civil Rights movement and challenges from Black social justice activists. I, likewise, focus significantly on anti-Black racism throughout this dissertation, including engagement with Black scholars addressing issues of race, environmentalism, and animal rights. Racism directed at other groups, however, also needs sustained attention. In my Conclusion, for example, I turn to the animalizing rhetoric of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, which has been repeatedly directed at the Latinx immigrant community in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, "Ecojustice, Religious Folklife and a Sound Ecology," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 5, no. 2 (2019): 105.

<sup>21</sup> Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant," 225-26.

justice message through the Eco-justice Project, as Hessel recounts in his *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, Ecology & Justice*.<sup>22</sup>

The UMC was also an early partner in eco-justice work. An Interboard Task Force on Ecology was created in 1970 during the transitional period of the newly merged denomination. The Interboard Task Force worked concurrently with the Social Principles Study Commission, and met for a two-day gathering called “Our Threatened Spaceship Earth.” The records of the gathering of task force members from various UMC boards and agencies include results from a brainstorming session for how the denominations could address emerging environmental challenges. The handwritten ideas include statements such as, “Need dramatic material to truly make people aware of seriousness of [ecological] problems,” and another acknowledging that there had been “No research about attitudes of U. M. churchman on ecological issues.”<sup>23</sup> The Interboard Task Force’s work helped establish environmentalism as a priority for the denomination.

Hessel, reflecting on his involvement in the eco-justice movement, emphasizes ecumenical connections in his telling of eco-justice’s origins, pointing to the 1972 United Nations Stockholm Conference on Environment and Development as a springboard for movement. In response to the Conference, the World Council of Churches (WCC) declared in 1975 that the world should strive for a “just, sustainable, and participatory society,” a statement of commitment which in turn impacted WCC member

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<sup>22</sup> Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, Ecology & Justice* (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1985), 11. Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant," 228-29.

<sup>23</sup> Interboard Task Force on Ecology, "Our Threatened Spaceship Earth (What Is the Mission of the United Methodist Church?)," (Washington, DC: 1970).

denominations and would go on to develop into the WCC theme of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.<sup>24</sup>

The UMC was one such member denomination of the WCC. Shortly after the 1972 adoption of the Social Principles, with its “The Natural World” environmental language, representatives from the General Board of Church and Society took part in ecumenical efforts to promote eco-justice theoethics.<sup>25</sup> Plans for a “Human Ecology” gathering sought to “engage the ethical and religious resources of the churches in the effort to achieve a more balanced relationship between human society and the environment.” The proposal for this gathering articulated a vision for an interfaith gathering, emphasizing both “Society’s responsibility to care for and protect the rights of both animate and inanimate nature” *and* the responsibility of ensuring that “quality environment is not purchased at the expense of the poor.”<sup>26</sup> The earliest denominational eco-justice documents already show the potential for tension within the movement, trying both to prioritize care for all creature, and to acknowledging that environmental actions need to focus on marginalized communities.

The strong multi-denominational ties of the eco-justice movement demonstrate eco-justice’s deep grounding in the leadership and structures of mainline Protestant

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<sup>24</sup> Dieter T. Hessel, "The Church's Eco-Justice Journey," in *Eco-Justice: The Unfinished Journey*, ed. William E. Gibson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 262.

<sup>25</sup> General Board of Church and Society has the responsibility in The UMC for carrying out the values of the Social Principles, and thus, is a leading player in setting denominational policy for ecological concerns. Aside from crafting and supporting polity statements for *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Resolutions*, GBCS also engages in important work outside of its role in General Conferences, lobbying for denominational stances in various levels of government and seeking to influence annual conferences and local churches to embrace social justice work.

<sup>26</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Proposal for a Project of Human Ecology in the Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church, 1972-1975, 1478-5-4:12, Involvement with Inter-faith Eco-Justice Coalition 1972-1975, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

traditions. Defining eco-justice simply as “justice for all of creation and all human beings,” Engel compares the enthusiasm of the first decades of the movement with the spirit of change of the Reformation era that birthed Protestantism. The eco-justice movement, Engel argues, viewed itself as one part of a “New Reformation,” which would transform theology, biblical interpretation, liturgics, and ethics and which would ensure that caring for God’s creation was part of the very soil of this New Reformation.<sup>27</sup> Paul Santmire confirms Engel’s view, writing that he and other Lutheran ecotheologians contributing to early ecotheological scholarship, like Joseph Sittler and Larry Rasmussen, understood themselves to be “fostering what a number of us thought of from the start as an ecological reformation of Christianity.”<sup>28</sup>

The eco-justice movement expanded significantly in the 1980s with the birth of the National Council of Churches (NCC) Eco-Justice Working Group (EJWG). The Eco-Justice Working Group, created by the NCC in 1983, functioned along the border of a caucus group and a program committee of an ecumenical organization. It was first established as a merger of The Responsible Lifestyle Task Force on “simple lifestyle” and the Churches Committee on Acid Rain, grouping people together to collaborate on “care for creation.”<sup>29</sup> The EJWG became more firmly established in 1984-1985 under the

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<sup>27</sup> Engel, "Democracy, Christianity, Ecology," 218.

<sup>28</sup> H. Paul Santmire, "American Lutherans Engage Ecological Theology: The First Chapter, 1962-2012, And Its Legacy," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 13, March/April, no. 2 (2013), <https://learn.elca.org/jle/american-lutherans-engage-ecological-theology-the-first-chapter-1962-2012-and-its-legacy/>.

<sup>29</sup> "History of Creation Justice Ministries," 2024, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.creationjustice.org/history.html>. J. Andy Smith III, "National Council of Churches, Eco-Justice

Working Group (USA)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005).

leadership of Chris Cowap, then Director of Economic and Social Justice for the NCC, and included mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and historically Black Protestant denominations.<sup>30</sup> Jaydee Hanson, who started his work at GBCS as a Program Director for Environmental Justice in the 1980s before eventually becoming the Assistant General Secretary, spoke about Chris Cowap's role in the formation of the EJWG.<sup>31</sup> Chris had been active in the NCC's initiative on energy, but wanted to do more. In conversation with Hanson, Cowap led a merger of energy advocates and those who were part of a "lifestyles" subcommittee that had related to work on the Clean Air Act. Together, these bodies formed the Eco-Justice Working Group. Through the EJWG, The UMC took an active role in leading and participating in ecumenical partnerships around eco-justice concerns. Paz Artaza-Regan, who worked as the Program Director for Environmental Justice at GBCS from 1986-2000, said that The UMC provided the "real leadership" of the EJWG. The UMC led in "forward thinking" ideas, changing the way the EJWG did its advocacy.<sup>32</sup>

Documents from the eighties show that the EJWG was divided into topical subcommittees: Clean Air, Consultation Planning, Education, Energy, Finances, and Toxic/Hazardous Wastes.<sup>33</sup> In 1986, the Eco-Justice Working Group held a major event at the Presbyterian Conference Center in Stony Point, NY titled "For the Love of Earth and People: The Eco-Justice Agenda." The aim of the event was "to gain a higher priority

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<sup>30</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Hanson, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

<sup>33</sup> Eco-Justice Working Group, Eco-Justice Working Group Committee Tentative List, June 20 1985 1986, For the Love of Earth and People Folder, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ.

for eco-justice on the agenda of the churches,” and for eco-justice to be the “context or perspective for dealing with all social issues.”<sup>34</sup> The event included workshops on the global nature of eco-justice, issues in U.S. public policy, the church’s response, and how to teach eco-justice ethics, and concluded with crafting an eco-justice call to action, and included representatives from various denominations and parachurch groups like the “Citizens’ Clearing House for Hazardous Wastes.”<sup>35</sup>

The EJWG’s first issue of focus was to strategize for toxics-related legislation, the first eco-themed resolution adopted by the NCC that was neither energy nor population related, Hanson reported. Artaza-Regan recounted the hard work and persistence required to help EJWG members move beyond theory to praxis on toxics and racial justice. She and Chris Cowap were the only women in the initial working group, and there was only one Black man who was part of the group. The other fourteen group members were White men. When discussing toxic wastes and race, Artaza-Regan prompted the gathering: “Have you talked *to* these [impacted] people?” It was all an “intellectual exercise,” at first, reflecting theologically on the connections between race, toxics, pollution, and the environment. Eco-justice historian Dana Horrell echoed Artaza-Regan’s sense of urgency around racial justice. He recalled the sentiment of eco-justice leaders: “These people [impacted by environmental racism] are dying and we need to

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<sup>34</sup> Eco-Justice Working Group, Revision #3. For the Love of Earth and People: The Eco-Justice Agenda, 10/3/1985 1985, For the Love of Earth and People Folder, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ.

<sup>35</sup> Eco-Justice Working Group, For the Love of Earth and People: The Eco-Justice Agenda, December 1-3 1986 1986, For the Love of Earth and People Folder, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Stony Point, NY.

fight for them.”<sup>36</sup> A 1987 gathering of leaders in the toxics movement shifted everything from “intellectual exercise” to action, with the decision to have the EJWG co-led by a church person and a “community” person. Artaza-Regan represented the churches, and environmental activist Richard Moore represented the community.<sup>37</sup> This collaboration is “the church ... being church as it is supposed to be – this is what it is to be working on the environment,” Artaza-Regan declared.

The Eco-justice Working Group gave attention to many other policy areas as well, and issued statements on an array of issues, which member denominations could then adapt with support from their own doctrinal statements.<sup>38</sup> UMC staff like Hanson and Artaza-Regan, and other scholars mention how staff in similar roles and positions across denominations worked closely together.<sup>39</sup> Hanson, for example, mentioned work on solar power, eliminating fossil fuels, genetics, and the rights of farmers as a few of the EJWG’s areas of action. Although the Working Group as a practice did not submit legislation directly to The UMC General Conferences or to the legislative bodies of other denominations, the Working Group’s influence appears in many of the policy statements submitted for consideration by the General Board of Church and Society, like those pertaining to toxic wastes and race. GBCS staff worked on policies alongside other

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<sup>36</sup> Dana K. Horrell, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, 30 June, 2025.

<sup>37</sup> I mention the importance of Moore’s role as a leader in establishing the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) and working for environmental justice later in this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Moody, "Caring for Creation: Environmental Advocacy by Mainline Protestant Organizations," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 246.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

ecumenical leaders through the Working Group, which were then adapted for adoption in a Methodist context.

As Artaza-Regan mentioned, The UMC viewed itself as a leader in environmentalism. In its report to the 1984 General Conference, for example, GBCS claimed that “our denomination is the first to give programmatic structure to issues of the **environment and natural resources**,” pointing to its work on hunger, energy policies, the Law of the Sea Treaty, and toxic wastes.<sup>40</sup> This claim shows eco-justice as an important part of GBCS’s advocacy portfolio, and as a growing point of pride for the denomination. Still, The UMC clearly did its work as part of the ecumenical community. In describing its advocacy approach, GBCS reported an emphasis on working “ecumenically with other organizations to monitor, research, and coordinate strategies for action” and “with various coalitions ... to achieve greater stewardship ... as well as greater impact.”<sup>41</sup> The UMC was a key player in the eco-justice movement, with many able ecumenical partners.

Ecumenical eco-justice connections continued to thrive in the 1990s. Lutheran eco-feminist ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda raises up the significance 1990 “Open Letter to the Religious Community,” which was a letter written by thirty-four scientists, including astronomer Carl Sagan, calling for environmentalism to be “infused with a vision of the sacred.” This letter evoked a response from interfaith religious leadership,

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<sup>40</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The 1984 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), I-7. Emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate* (1984), I-2.

called the “Joint Appeal in Religion and Science.”<sup>42</sup> The Joint Appeal, which in turn influenced the establishment of the Forum on Religion and Ecology and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), demonstrated the “moral power” of the religious community, Moe-Lobeda argues, encouraging “hope, vision, and courage.”<sup>43</sup> The NRPE, founded in 1993, brought together 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 to address care for the environment, with the mission: “The Partnership builds upon the religious beliefs and moral values of each of the bodies which make it up and which will independently undertake its own initiatives in its own community.”<sup>44</sup> This broad, interfaith coalition that included both partners outside of the Christian tradition and cooperation between and substantial funding from Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Christians expanded the reach of religious environmentalism.

The WCC continued to play a role in the eco-justice movement as well.<sup>45</sup> Ethicist Willis Jenkins highlights the 1990 WCC conference themed “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” as a space where the movement turned its attention to nonhuman animals. The 1990 conference inspired some eco-justice activists to “suggest that

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<sup>42</sup> The Joint Appeal statement is available here: [http://fore.research.yale.edu/publications/statements/joint\\_appeal.html](http://fore.research.yale.edu/publications/statements/joint_appeal.html).

<sup>43</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 139.

<sup>44</sup> “History, National Religious Partnership for the Environment,” <http://www.nrpe.org/history.html>, accessed 30 December 2025. I interview NRPE’s current executive director, Cassandra Carmichael, and share her insights in both this chapter and in Chapter 2.

<sup>45</sup> I also talk about the work of the WCC while discussing the writings of H. Paul Santmire on eco-justice and animals in the last section of this chapter.

nonhuman creatures might also image the divine.” Jenkins comments that this developing theology resulted in some resistance and anxiety from religious eco-leaders who aligned with an environmental stewardship framework, who worried that eco-justice advocates were “confusing Creator and creation.”<sup>46</sup> Ecumenical partners also joined in support of the 1991 United Church of Christ-sponsored People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (discussed more extensively later in this chapter), and the 2000 release of the Earth Charter as events that demonstrate eco-justice ideals impacting the wider environmental movement.<sup>47</sup>

Writing in 2011, Engel comments on his perspective of a diminished eco-justice enthusiasm by the end of the 1990s. Engel believes that as the season of grassroots change that birthed the eco-justice movement subsided, the movement also began to lose some of the societal structures of support that enabled eco-justice to grow. Addressing the “slipping away” of what he calls the “underlying presupposition” of eco-justice work, he writes,

The model local/world citizen who is concerned with issues of the day and who joins with like-minded positive collective action for justice and the common good, and on whom we implicitly counted as the agent for a new religiously inspired environmental stewardship, has become an elusive presence in the rapidly shifting currents of contemporary political life, replaced by what appears to be a very

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<sup>46</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Hessel, "The Church's Eco-Justice Journey," 271. The Earth Charter was the product of a lengthy process, which began in response to the 1987 “Our Common Future Report,” developed by the World Commission on Environment and Development, an initiative of the United Nations. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, conversations about an Earth Charter commenced, but no agreements were yet reached. In 1997, an Earth Charter Commission was created, with membership including scientists, legal scholars, and religious leaders from around the globe. After multiple drafts, the Earth Charter was officially offered in 2000. See <https://earthcharter.org/about-the-earth-charter/history/> for an expanded history of the Earth Charter.

private, inward-looking, and defensive idea of what is required of us as members of the body politic.<sup>48</sup>

The rise and growth of the eco-justice movement in the 1970s and 1980s and all of the related or involved institutions and organizations that emerged or played a key role, followed by the impact of the social shifts Engel describes above are seen in the case study in Chapter 2, as I trace the expansion of eco-justice concerns beginning in the late 1960s in The UMC, and eventually note a series of changes in staffing, budgetary support, ecumenical buy-in, and more that shaped and continue to impact the ongoing presence of eco-justice theoethics within the denomination.

### What's in a Name?

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, as I explore more fully in the next chapter, the language of eco-justice has shifted both in The UMC and in the wider ecumenical community. Although mainline Protestant denominations are still doing the work articulated by the eco-justice movement, often, leaders and activists use different terminology to describe environmental work in the church. Drawing from the interviews I conducted, I share some reflections from denominational and ecumenical leaders on what eco-justice means to them, and what terminology they use to describe their work today.

Hanson and Artaza-Regan, along with retired clergy and eco-justice activist Pat Watkins, have the longest history with the eco-justice movement of my interviewees. At the beginning of the eco-justice movement, Hanson shared, the term was chosen because it was explicit about incorporating ecology and economics. Eco-justice is “one way of

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<sup>48</sup> Engel, "Democracy, Christianity, Ecology," 220.

putting together the human face and the rest of God’s creation in one package,” he said. “Words really help point us in the right direction.”<sup>49</sup> Artaza-Regan defined eco-justice as the “intersection of ecological and economic justice.”<sup>50</sup> She called the eco-justice framework “very human-centered, very ‘how do we lift up the issues that impact the human community that are environmental and economic.’” Artaza-Regan noted that GBCS typically called its “own” work outside of its partnership with the NCC and other denominations through the Eco-Justice Working Group “environmental justice.” She described “environmental justice” as “looking at justice for all creation.” This designation for GBCS’s work predates the also-named environmental justice movement that I discuss below. Artaza-Regan implied that over time, however, GBCS’s departmental name came to share the ideals of the environmental justice movement, which was on the rise just as she began her tenure at GBCS.<sup>51</sup> She called the environmental justice approach “very anthropocentric,” but suggested that “that’s where the church lives, in the human community.”

Continuing to reflect on the long arc of the eco-justice movement, Artaza-Regan spoke of a shift in the language around Christian environmentalism in the last twenty years. She mentioned the impact of the 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato Si’*, suggesting that Pope Francis’s vision has helped religious communities think of “kinship rather than

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<sup>49</sup> Hanson, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

<sup>51</sup> Laurel Kearns reports that this identification of The UMC with environmental justice led to UMC staffers being asked to testify on Capitol Hill *less frequently* about matters related to endangered species and nonhuman animals more broadly, since the denomination appeared to be primarily concerned about environmental racism and a human-centered approach to environmentalism. Kearns, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, 24 April 2026.

kingdom.” Likewise, she noted the renaming of the Eco-Justice Working Group to Creation Justice Ministries in 2003 (a shift I discuss later in this chapter). “I think there’s been an evolution [in language] in the last twenty years,” she said.

Pat Watkins, a retired UMC clergyperson from the Virginia Annual Conference, has been part of leading a shift in language. He served in a variety of eco-justice roles through the decades, and successfully lobbied the General Board of Global Ministries to name him the first “Missionary for the Care of God’s Creation” in 2009.<sup>52</sup> He chaired his Annual Conference’s Eco-Justice Working Group, but eventually, he said, he urged the group to rename itself, feeling that the existing label did not adequately communicate that their work was faith-based. “Language is important,” Watkins said. “I needed [the name of the group] to be more inclusive, [connected to the] complete and total life of church.” The group became the Caretakers of God’s Creation. Watkins continues to work with environmental groups, including The UMC’s Creation Justice Movement team. With updated language, Watkins suggests, “we’re doing a better job of connecting environmental justice with racial and other kinds of justice.”

Sharon Delgado is a laywoman in the California-Pacific Annual Conference who has worked on environmental issues for decades at the local level, has written extensively on the topic, and who, like Watkins, has been part of the denomination’s Creation Justice Movement. Delgado shared that the focus of eco-justice is “always with ... linking ecology and justice.” Delgado mentioned, however, that though eco-justice has “a positive connotation to me,” that she does not often use the term eco-justice anymore, preferring instead to speak about “earth justice.” “None of the words are perfect,” she

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<sup>52</sup> Pat Watkins, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, 5 September, 2025.

said. She considers “environmental justice” the most used term in UMC circles, but “ecology is a better, more accurate term, but not everyone understands that,” suggesting that The UMC’s commitments aligned best with a broader approach than the environmental justice movement.<sup>53</sup>

John Hill, who recently finished a term as the Interim General Secretary of GBCS, and whose portfolio included environmental advocacy since his start at GBCS in 2003, spoke of the shift away from eco-justice language in recent years, and toward “climate justice” language.<sup>54</sup> “There’s much less conversation around eco-justice broadly,” he said. Climate justice has become the shorthand language even when it is referring to “more traditional conservational topics.” Even the Eco-Justice Working Group, before becoming Creation Justice Ministries, was beginning to primarily use climate justice language.<sup>55</sup> The UMC “still encourages basic education and study around faith-rooted environmentalism broadly,” Hill said, “but almost always with the goal of action related to climate justice.”

Cassandra Carmichael, former EJWG consultant and director of the NCC’s Eco-Justice program and current executive director at the NRPE, shared that she thinks eco-justice meant something different in the early years of the movement than it does now.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Sharon Delgado, interview by Beth Quick, 5 June, 2024.

<sup>54</sup> John S. Hill, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, May 28, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Creation Justice Ministries’ website defines climate justice as “protecting, restoring, and rightly sharing God’s creation. We seek justice for all of God’s creation, including the human beings who live in it. Our approach to creation justice is informed by respect and love for our Creator. We draw on the rich heritage of Christian scriptures and traditions which call us not only to till and keep the Earth, but also to act for racial, economic, and environmental justice.” See <https://www.creationjustice.org/about.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Carmichael, interview.

“It is not a phrase that the NRPE uses,” she said. “I’m not sure who still uses the phrase.” Like Hill, Carmichael noted Creation Justice Ministries’ shift from eco-justice to creation justice language. “I’m not sure [eco-justice] fully explains or postulates the challenge.” She described eco-justice as “approaching environmental issues with a bent toward justice. Not just creation care. It’s not just wanting to save the pandas and the whales. It’s more about: How do we center justice for people and for all of God’s creation?” Language is evolving, however, and Carmichael reported that even the term “creation care” is used less than it was in the 1990s. Although the term eco-justice was coined to connote the way ecological justice and other justice issues are linked, Carmichael posited that people no longer perceive the term eco-justice as expressing the “reckoning” and “greater awareness” of intersectionality concerns that are relevant today. Carmichael connected the need for an ever-changing vocabulary of religious environmentalism to the breadth of the concept of justice in the biblical texts. “It’s a small word – only seven letters – but a big word in terms of how you just the word justice and what you put with it. The lens of justice. The intersectionality of justice. I think *that’s* a really important [phrase].”

The language used in activist circles in the stead of “eco-justice” reflects the strategizing of leaders in the movement who are seeking the best framework to draw in participation and commitment to Christian environmentalism. Rather than a change in core values, the alternatives to eco-justice language offered by interviewees reflects a desire to use language that feels contemporary and consistent with language used in the larger environmental movement. Ecojustice language (often without the hyphen) is also still frequently used in scholarly theological work to describe the theoethical

commitments connected to the eco-justice framework.<sup>57</sup> I continue to employ the language of eco-justice, then, as the word that best captures both the history and guiding principles of mainline Protestant environmentalism. I turn now to the articulation of those core values that makeup the theological underpinnings of eco-justice.

### Eco-justice: Theology

The eco-justice movement, in its many guises as illustrated above, is a theoethical framework for activism used by activists in the religious and societal sectors, and its core values are made explicit in the detailed theological claims made by activists and leaders about the work of the movement, including some leaders introduced above. At the same time, scholars studying eco-justice from an outsider vantage point, like ethicist Willis Jenkins, also assess the theological underpinnings they observe in the eco-justice framework. Both perspectives are important, especially in assessing how the movement enacts its own theological claims. As this dissertation examines eco-justice theology in relation to its expression and practice within denominational contexts, in this chapter I emphasize the work of eco-theologians who connect eco-justice tenets to ecclesial settings.

From within the eco-justice movement and their role in promoting it in the 1980s and 1990s, William Gibson and Dieter Hessel offered substantial contributions to

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<sup>57</sup> See examples such as: Ernst M. Conradie, "Limits to Justice, Ecojustice, and Climate Justice?," *Scriptura* 122, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7833/122-1-2136>; Claudia Jahnelt, "God dwells in Flesh: Decolonial Ecojustice and Planetary Ethics in the "Anthropocene"," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 122, 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7833/122-1-2135>; Rebecca A. Martusewicz, "Toward an Anti-Centric Ecological Culture: Bringing a Critical Eco-Feminist Analysis to EcoJustice Education," (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013); Titon, "Ecojustice, Religious Folklife and a Sound Ecology."

articulating the theological claims from their Protestant perspectives that support the framework. Gibson begins by emphasizing what makes eco-justice distinct, while at the same time endeavoring to emphasize the inclusive nature of eco-justice theology. “The term eco-justice is not to be understood as in any sense turning away from concern for justice in the social order,” Gibson writes, “but rather as *combining* justice to people with justice to the rest of creation. It is not that we want the well-being of humankind *and* the well-being of nature, as though these represented two separate sets of concerns, but that we can’t have either without the other.” Gibson sees this eco-justice story acted out in the biblical narrative, with God acting as Creator-Deliverer, the one who creates *and* the one who “executes justice for the oppressed.”<sup>58</sup> Eco-justice *is* the execution of justice for the oppressed by God, the Creator, and eco-justice *is* what the Creator calls on creation to fulfill.<sup>59</sup>

Hessel defines eco-justice as an “interlocking web of concern about the earth’s carrying capacity,” which emphasizes the connections between social issues like hunger, poverty, energy, sexism, and racism.<sup>60</sup> Eco-justice asks whether humans will respect earth’s limits and live in community with the earth and one another. Reflecting on the work of eco-justice, Gibson echoes Hessler, calling eco-justice a work in progress that is seen when “people of color and labor unions and their allies” collaborate and organize to eliminate toxics, when “habitats are preserved, and wild creatures remain free,” and when

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<sup>58</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 61. Originally printed in *The Egg: A Journal of Eco-Justice* 7 (1), Spring 1987.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Hessel, *For Creation's Sake*, 12.

gender equity enables all people to share in caring for the earth.<sup>61</sup> Eco-justice is concerned with justice for all of creation, in both concrete and ideological terms.

The eco-justice movement has been a movement primarily operating *within* institutional structures from its origins. As already mentioned, the movement's early home was located at Cornell University, growing out of intersections between ecumenical campus ministries and environmental advocacy. Aside from institutions of higher education, the primary home of the eco-justice movement is within the church, and, as discussed, eco-justice theology and ecumenical theology have intersected on a number of points over the decades. Thus, many of the "directives" of eco-justice theology speak directly to the church, calling on the church and its leaders to take action. Hessel argues that the institutional church "has a special mission and responsibility for eco-justice," both because of the increasing ecological degradation *and* because of the theological failures of Western Christianity, which has held too narrow a view of justice.<sup>62</sup> He links an eco-justice ethic with an ecumenical ethic, emphasizing that faith communities working together can better attend to planetary crisis.<sup>63</sup> He names several areas of responsibility for the church in carrying out the work of eco-justice, including attention to all creatures, while at the same time attending to various ways that the earth needs justice within human communities.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 295-96.

<sup>62</sup> Dieter T. Hessel, "Eco-Justice Theology after Nature's Revolt," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Many of the theological reflections from other early activist-scholars in the eco-justice movement expand on the priorities outlined by Gibson and Hessel, making an explicit effort to counter perceptions that environmentalism is incompatible with other justice movements. In a 1985 essay titled, “Eco-Justice Themes in Christian Ethics Since the 1960s,” for example, Roger L. Shinn, a United Church of Christ clergyperson, ethicist, and active member of the WCC’s church and society work, notes that the very word “eco-justice,” whose hyphen indicates an amalgamation of two terms, illustrates that much has “gone wrong” in history, separating ecology and justice.<sup>65</sup> Like other eco-justice activist-scholars, Shinn, too, points to delusions of unlimited growth as a the “modern heresy” that eco-justice confronts.<sup>66</sup> Shinn reflects on tensions in early Christian environmentalism voiced from impoverished communities and social justice advocates who expressed concern that environmental causes were only “hobbies” for the wealthy. Eco-justice, he counters, engages in the challenging work of overcoming both the *perception* that ecological activism and social justice are separate, and the unfortunate instances of *practice* where environmental advocacy is led by privileged communities.<sup>67</sup>

Scholars and activists with more contemporary reflections on eco-justice theology also contribute important perspectives on the eco-justice movement in recent years, like the reflections I shared on the meaning of “eco-justice” in the preceding section. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda defines eco-justice as the term for the “linkage” that “demands holding social justice and ecological well-being as inseparable in the quest for a sustainable

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<sup>65</sup> Roger L. Shinn, “Eco-Justice Themes in Christian Ethics Since the 1960s,” in *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, ecology, and justice*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1985), 97.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-04.

relationship between the human species and the planet.”<sup>68</sup> Eco-justice attempts to overcome the “seductive temptation” to separate social injustice from “the Earth’s degradation.”<sup>69</sup> Pointing to statements by the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, Moe-Lobeda uses language of “ecological debt” to describe the eco-justice movement’s intent: eco-justice seeks to recognize and work towards repayment of ecological debt that favors the Global North over the Global South, and visits ecological degradation unequally on economic and racial groups.<sup>70</sup>

Lutheran social ethicist and ecojustice theologian Larry Rasmussen writes that an eco-justice ethic for the twenty-first century is part of the mission of the church, enabling the church to build community despite the “humanly dominated biosphere” in which the church exists.<sup>71</sup> Eco-justice is the “moral norm” and goal toward which humanity should strive. Rasmussen offers “ecumenical earth” or “community of life” and “habitat Earth” as alternate names for eco-justice, where the church and community partner together to pursue social and ecological justice.<sup>72</sup> Rasmussen implores the church to adapt an eco-justice perspective in theology and praxis to prevent further ecological and moral devastation.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-11.

<sup>71</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, "Eco-Justice: Church and Community Together," in *Earth Habitat: Eco-injustice and the Church's Response*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen and Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001), 6.

<sup>72</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith*, 6; Rasmussen, "Eco-Justice: Church and Community Together."

<sup>73</sup> Rasmussen, "Eco-Justice: Church and Community Together."

Scholars like Willis Jenkins, working from the “outside” of the eco-justice movement bring helpful analysis and perspective, identifying the movement’s theological claims and placing eco-justice within the broader movement of Christian environmentalism. Jenkins’ *Ecologies of Grace* makes a meaningful contribution in elaborating on the theological claims that undergird the eco-justice movement, drawing on Kearns’ framework, discussed in the last chapter, to theorize “what an ethic must accomplish in order to make both environmental and theological sense.” Assessing the work of eco-justice, he explores the concepts of grace employed by each environmentalism type in Kearns’ framework (stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality) to better understand “how metaphors of salvation guide the formation of practical Christian strategies.”<sup>74</sup>

Jenkins argues that the eco-justice strategy centers on the “theological standing of creation,” drawing on the secular concept of nature’s standing – a sense of obligatory respect for creation that must be met by actions of care for the earth.<sup>75</sup> Jenkins asserts that the eco-justice framework is grounded in the theological positioning of creation’s status as valued because of its relationship to God. Since God has declared the whole creation “good,” then liberation and justice are likewise for the whole creation. Since God is revealed through creation, then humans must listen to “nature’s voices.”<sup>76</sup>

For Jenkins, although eco-justice emphasizes listening to creation, one practice of aligning with the God of creation is working with and for justice for marginalized

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<sup>74</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 18-19.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

*persons*. Eco-justice, in its ties of ecology and economy, focuses especially on justice for the poor. To work for economic and political justice *is* a practice of working for creation justice.<sup>77</sup> Jenkins describes the eco-justice movement as a strategy that enabled a “formal approach to environmental concerns within ecclesial commitments to humanitarian problems.” To accomplish functioning with this strategy, however, eco-justice had to “present the ethical significance of environmental problems while avoiding any debate pitting human interests against nature’s interests, anthropocentrism against ecocentrism.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, the eco-justice approach allowed denominations to employ the same rhetoric and theological claims for care of creation as for care for marginalized and oppressed persons.<sup>79</sup> Jenkins points out that eco-justice theology, in order to attend to “humanitarian problems,” has to *reconcile* anthropocentrism with care for nature, even while it articulates a *rejection* of anthropocentrism, in order to accomplish its work. Jenkins’ comments on anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are telling, pointing to the need for a deeper exploration of the links between anthropocentrism, eco-justice, and ecocentrism, particularly in response to environmental justice and the work of racial justice.

### Eco-justice and Environmental Justice

The eco-justice movement and the environmental justice movement are distinct approaches to environmentalism, but their histories are more mixed than one might

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

suspect.<sup>80</sup> The eco-justice movement, inseparable from the mainline Christian institutions from which it operates, seeks a holistic approach to justice that emphasizes ecological justice as an essential pursuit alongside other quests for justice, like economic, racial, and gender justice. Environmental justice, meanwhile, is an intentionally human-centered justice movement that focuses on the racial disparities in the impact of environmental degradation. Although many Christian groups, like the United Church of Christ and the EJWG, have played important roles in environmental justice work, it is not exclusively connected with a religious tradition as a movement. Despite their somewhat differing approaches, eco-justice and environmental justice advocates have partnered together in numerous ways, grounded in their shared commitment to economic and racial justice, as I show both below and in Chapter 2's case study.<sup>81</sup>

Before further exploring the relationship between the ideologies of these movements, a brief overview of the environmental justice movement will make comparisons with eco-justice clearer. Historian Diane Glave traces the environmental justice movement to its roots in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s advocacy for sanitation workers in the Civil Rights movement just prior to his assassination.<sup>82</sup> Addressing issues

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<sup>80</sup> Though these two movements are distinct, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, particularly by "lay" environmentalists. I discuss the interchangeable usage of these two terms in The UMC context more in Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>81</sup> The interaction between the eco-justice movement and environmental justice movements is not limited to the examples I include in Chapters 1 and 2. For example, Richard Moore, a Latinx community organizer who served for many years as part of the Eco-Justice Working Group was a leader in establishing the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), which worked for economic, racial, and environmental justice in the Southwest. Paul Almeida, "The Network for Environmental and Economic Justice in the Southwest: Interview with Richard Moore," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 5, no. 1 (1994/03/01 1994): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455759409358574>.

<sup>82</sup> Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 128.

of environmental racism – that people of color face intentionally or unintentionally increased exposure and harm from a variety of ecological hazards – environmental justice works to eliminate these inequalities, using some of the same strategies as the Civil Rights movement.<sup>83</sup>

In the late 1970s in North Carolina, the Ward Transformer company began dumping toxic carcinogenic waste Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), alongside the highways of Warren County. When people protested the dumping, the state moved to bury the contaminated soil, and chose Warren County, a county with a predominately Black population, as the site for a toxic waste landfill.<sup>84</sup> A protest movement gained momentum, peaking at the building of the landfill in 1982. Rev. Benjamin Chavis, who had taken part in the protests, and Rev. Charles Lee, United Church of Christ (UCC) clergypersons working with the UCC Commission for Racial Justice, began working with other civil rights and environmental activists to protest acts of environmental racism like those in Warren County.<sup>85</sup> Then in 1986 and 1987, the NCC and UCC issued a groundbreaking reports, “Toxic Pollution in Minority and Low-Income Communities” (NCC, 1986) and “Toxic Waste and Race” (UCC, 1987).<sup>86</sup> These reports, which showed

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 129. For a broader look at the intersection of race, racism, and the environment, see also Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, Laurel Kearns, and Whitney A. Bauman, "Race, Religion, and Environmental Racism in North America," in *Religion and Nature in North America*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Whitney A. Bauman (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

<sup>84</sup> "How Everyday People Started a Movement that's Shaping Climate Action to This Day," NPR, 2023, accessed 31 December, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/05/1198908047/climate-action-environmentalism-history>.

<sup>85</sup> Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 133. Laurel Kearns and Rebecca Kneale Gould, "Ecology and Religious Environmentalism in the United States," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (2018), 615.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. and Charles Lee, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (Commission for Racial Justice United Church of Christ, 1987), <https://www.ucc.org/wp->

that polluting and toxic waste sites were more likely to be placed in economically disadvantaged communities, especially low income communities of color, galvanized the emerging environmental justice movement toward further organization and action.<sup>87</sup>

Around the same time, sociologist Robert Bullard began publishing works that connected race, civil rights, and environmental harms.<sup>88</sup>

As momentum for the movement built, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, DC in 1991, where over 650 leaders from North America worked together to adopt a statement on the “Principles of Environmental Justice.”<sup>89</sup> The first statement of the Principles reads, “Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.”<sup>90</sup> The third statement also mentions seeking a “sustainable planet for humans and other living things.” Another mentions opposition to military occupation and exploitation of people “and other life

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content/uploads/2020/12/ToxicWastesRace.pdf; Kearns and Gould, "Ecology and Religious Environmentalism," 615.

<sup>87</sup> Kearns and Gould, "Ecology and Religious Environmentalism," 615.

<sup>88</sup> Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*, 7-8. Bullard's *Confronting Environmental Racism* is still his most cited work. Other examples of his many works include *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, Boulder: Westview Press, (2000) 1990, and *The Black Metropolis in the Twenty-First Century: Race and the Politics of Place*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Although the UCC sponsored the Summit, the EJWG was not invited to help in planning. Laurel Kearns writes, “The NCC EJWG, whether because it was primarily white and not as grassroots in makeup, or because it was explicitly Christian, was not invited to help plan the Summit. The explanation to one member – that “we don’t want Christ preached” – is indicative of an artificial divide that continues to exist” between religious and non-religious environmental groups. Laurel Kearns, "Ecology and the Environment," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice* (2012), 597. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr., "Foreword," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>90</sup> First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, *The Principles of Environmental Justice*, (Washington, DC: 1991), <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.pdf>.

forms.” The Principles close with an appeal for all to work for “the health of the natural world.” Aside from these three statements, the seventeen Principles are primarily human-centered, and do not mention religion. As the preamble to the document declares, the Principles are about securing “political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.” The expansive topics included in the document cover protection from harm from nuclear testing and toxic waste, self-determination, safe and healthy workplaces, reparations for environmental injustices, acknowledgement of the rights of Native Peoples, and support for social and environmental education.<sup>91</sup>

Returning to examining the eco-justice and environmental justice movements side by side, understanding the relationship between the movements helps explain why eco-justice theoethics have regularly taken a more anthropocentric approach than the movements’ value statements would suggest. Gibson comments on the interchangeability of language in mainline denominations, noting that eco-justice and environmental justice have been used synonymously to refer to Christian ecological concerns.<sup>92</sup> In his own Presbyterian Church USA, as I have mentioned, the denominational environmental office was the “Office of Environmental Justice.”<sup>93</sup> Eventually, environmental justice developed a more distinctive meaning from the term eco-justice, but Gibson’s sense of the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice – the Unfinished Journey*, 90.

<sup>93</sup> As I will mention in the next chapter, The UMC’s ecological work area has also been called “environmental justice,” although this term preceded the emergence of the environmental justice movement. Eventually, however, continued usage reflected both a commitment to the environmental justice movement and a sense of overlap between movements.

intertwined commitments between these two movements is clear, resonating with the connections described by those whom I interviewed.

When I asked Avery Lamb, executive director of Creation Justice Ministries, to define eco-justice, he did so by contrasting the term with environmental justice.<sup>94</sup> Eco-justice is “the interconnection between humanity and the rest of creation,” an ideology that “recognizes that humans can’t be separated from the environment.” Eco-justice recognizes that “justice and flourishing for the environment requires humanity and vice versa.” Compared to environmental justice, he said, eco-justice attends to both the human and more-than-human, both creaturely and non-creaturely life. On the other hand, environmental justice “is really focused on human communities.” He described the environmental justice movement as “narrower in focus” and addressing “localized environmental hazards,” emphasizing low-income communities and communities of color. Creation Justice Ministries focuses on both eco-justice and environmental justice concerns. Rev. Jenny Phillips, the Director of Environmental Sustainability at the General Board of Global Ministries of The UMC and founder of the Fossil Free UMC caucus, shared an understanding like Lamb’s.<sup>95</sup> She said,

When I think about eco-justice - I think about respect for God’s creation including all of God’s creation - animals to humans - relationship between God, earth, and us and the justice that informs how we engage in that relationship. But I hear [eco-justice] more and more used with a lens toward racial equity and addressing environmental injustice ... There’s a very human focus to the work. There’s still care for the rest of the environment. There’s something about justice that in my experience draws people toward the social issues.

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<sup>94</sup> Lamb, interview.

<sup>95</sup> Jenny Phillips, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, 23 September, 2025.

Phillips' comments reflect her perception of an eco-justice theoethic that shifted to a more human-centric focus over time.

Some eco-justice movement leaders claim that eco-justice clearly already encompasses the work of racial justice from early in the movement, like William Gibson and Dieter Hessel, as noted above. For example, in a recent article, South African Reformed ethicist Ernst Conradie describes eco-justice as an ethic that “encompasses more than environmental justice while certainly including [environmental justice].” Similarly, Moe-Lobeda describes environmental justice and climate justice as “two streams” of the global eco-justice movement, with both streams “rapidly converging” in their overlapping address of both racism and climate injustice.<sup>96</sup> The Eco-justice Working Group published a brochure (undated) describing the difference between the terms in this way: “Environmental Justice is a holistic term that includes all ministries designed to heal and defend creation. Eco-Justice is an even broader term that includes efforts to assure justice for all of creation and the human beings who live in it.”<sup>97</sup> The eco-justice movement sought to understand and communicate its own relationship to environmental justice. A deeper look shows areas of tension between the movements, and the resulting attempts by the eco-justice movement to come alongside the environment justice movement.

Willis Jenkins takes care to describe what he sees as substantive differences between eco-justice and environmental justice theologies. He counters any notions that

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<sup>96</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 39-40.

<sup>97</sup> Undated NCC Brochure cited by Laurel Kearns, "Religion and Environmental Justice," in *Religions and Environments: A Reader in Religion, Nature, and Ecology*, ed. Richard R. Bohannon II (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 301.

the eco-justice movement and environmental justice movement overlap completely, with environment justice simply being a “more anthropocentric” version of the same ecological strategy. Environmental justice’s explicit focus on the racist and sexist roots of domination in conjunction with ecological domination is part of a “distinct practical strategy.” The environmental justice movement focuses on “disruptions of human dignity,” linking civil and environmental rights.<sup>98</sup> Environmental justice, then, is not “an anthropocentric version” of the eco-justice framework, but instead embodies a form of anthropocentrism for the purpose of using “human personhood” to reveal and respond to environmental challenges. The eco-justice movement and environmental justice movements retain overlapping, but distinctive primary priorities and theological frameworks.

Like Jenkins, Richard Bohannon and Kevin O’Brien aim to differentiate eco-justice and environmental justice, but they focus on distinct aspects of each movement. They describe eco-justice as a more “abstract concept” than the approach of environmental justice as the latter links social and environmental injustices both in shared causes and shared solutions. Eco-justice’s deep theoretical and theological grounding, though being more abstract, they argue, is also more comprehensive, working for “all creatures everywhere,” human and nonhuman.<sup>99</sup> Eco-justice, they claim, focuses on theoretical theological claims rather than the quantitative, data-driven reports on racial

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<sup>98</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 94-95.

<sup>99</sup> Richard R. Bohannon II and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Environmental Justice and Eco-Justice,” in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Whitney A. Bauman, Richard R. Bohannon II, and Kevin J. O’Brien (New York: Routledge, 2011), 172.

discrimination that undergird the work of environmental justice.<sup>100</sup> Bohannan and O'Brien further contrast the grassroots activism of the environmental justice movement with the tendency towards top-down leadership in the eco-justice movement. Eco-justice leaders have tended to be highly placed leaders within denominations who are highly integrated into hierarchical structures.<sup>101</sup> In contrast to Engel's characterization above of the eco-justice movement as a grassroots movement, Bohannan and O'Brien indicate that the movement is better known for its operation *within* denominational structures. They assert, nonetheless, that despite their distinctive emphases, eco-justice and environmental justice do not need to be in conflict. They point to Catholic liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, who was influential in the crafting of the papal document *Laudato Si*, as an example of one who combines the theological framework of eco-justice with the attention to communities experiencing environmental discrimination that characterizes the environmental justice movement.<sup>102</sup>

Aside from theological or ideological differences between eco-justice and environmental justice, other scholars point to the history of the eco-justice movement alongside the US Civil Rights movement to explain both the potential tensions between eco-justice and environmental justice work *and* give explanation for the motivation of eco-justice leadership to intentionally align with the values of the more anthropocentric environmental justice movement. More than one scholar conjectures that the rising

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 174. As I have already noted, however, many leaders in the environmental justice movement were also highly placed staff persons in denominational justice offices. The environmental justice movement was also suspicious of white leaders from within the church, and so sought to increase leadership by People of Color in the movement.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 174-75.

popularity of eco-justice ethics was due in part to people clamoring for “less divisive” activist opportunities. Bradford Verter calls the Civil Rights Movement the “peak” of “liberal Protestant activism,” at least in American memory.<sup>103</sup> He argues, however, that mainline denominational leaders were “unwilling to surrender their privileged positions” in the freedom movement, and thus many white activists began withdrawing from racial justice work in the 1970s.<sup>104</sup> Verter argues that emerging concerns like Christian environmentalism served, in part, as an excuse for mainline denominations to shift support away from racial justice endeavors, arguing that these emerging justice issues also needed support.<sup>105</sup>

Akin to Verter’s commentary, William Gibson also acknowledges that for some, focusing on care for the earth was more palatable than attending to racism and civil rights advocacy. He takes pains, however, to emphasize the harmony between eco-justice and the work of racial justice. Pointing to the first Earth Day in April 1970 as his own eco-justice “awakening,” he notes that some people turned to environmentalism because it seemed less “abrasive” and divisive than antiwar work and civil rights activism. Yet, he insists that the eco-justice ethic “emphatically [rejects]” such thinking - “The concept of justice must be expanded to embrace all creation, human and nonhuman. Earth and people would thrive together or not at all.”<sup>106</sup> In his introduction to the “Toxic Pollution

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<sup>103</sup> Bradford Verter, "Furthering the Freedom Struggle: Racial Justice Activism in the Mainline Churches since the Civil Rights Era," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 185.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>106</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 2-3.

and Environmental Justice” section of his *Eco-Justice* reader, Gibson seems to suggest that it takes the kind of organizational strength that the eco-justice movement offers to respond to the institutional powers of the “poisoners and impoverishers” dumping toxic wastes. Grassroots movements, he writes, are always struggling “against the enormous force of institutionalized private interest.”<sup>107</sup> The eco-justice movement has long been involved in the work of supporting, organizing, and acting in the interests of environmental justice.

Like Gibson, those I interviewed within the eco-justice movement also expressed a similar commitment to the priorities of environmental justice, while noting eco-justice’s distinctions from the environmental justice movement. In my interview with Jaydee Hanson, he reflected on the important contributions of Black grassroots activists who were leaders in bringing attention to climate change. Black grassroots activists were “tough folks used to fighting the fights, not [dealing with] the platitudes of church,” he reflected. Black leaders “grasped why we needed to work on climate change before White members did,” he said.<sup>108</sup> John Hill shared that he sees The UMC’s advocacy as primarily focused on environmental justice, with its alignment with racial justice concerns in the United States. However, “that is [both] who we are *and* not exclusively what we do.” In The UMC, “environmental justice” work includes stewardship and conservation, along with attention to racial justice and reconciliation. So, The UMC “environmental justice” approach aligns with the racial justice themes of the environmental justice movement, but the movement’s focused work is not what The

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>108</sup> Hanson, interview.

UMC is “exclusively meant to do.” “Environmental justice” gets used as an umbrella term. The term eco-justice includes those broader tasks in which The UMC engages – stewardship, conservation, and intersection with other systems of justice work. “That [intersection with other systems of justice has] really been our focus,” Hill said.<sup>109</sup>

The emphasis of support for the environmental justice movement is an important part of the eco-justice movement, reflecting its responsiveness to the Civil Rights movement, racial justice, and increasing attention to environmental racism and the disparate impact of ecological harm visited on Black and Latinx communities compared to White communities. Yet, in its support of the human-centered work of the environmental justice movement, eco-justice often shifts away from its theological claims about the whole creation. Jenkins writes that the shift in focus to toxics and environmental racism in the 1980s required eco-justice leaders to clarify whether the work of eco-justice would prioritize a “a just human society” or “ecological wholeness.” Which justice issues would and should get the most, and *first* attention of the movement? Jenkins summarizes the tension asking, “Does justice render its due to creation indirectly through respect of human persons, or directly through respect of extrahuman creatures?”<sup>110</sup> I argue that despite claiming agreement with the latter sentiments, the eco-justice movement tends toward indirect attention to nonhuman creation.

### Eco-justice and Non-Human Animals

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<sup>109</sup> Hill, interview. I include more interview material on the relationship between eco-justice, environmental justice, animals, and anthropocentrism in Chapter 2.

<sup>110</sup> Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 63.

Theological and ethical statements about the eco-justice movement *do* make explicit mention of non-human animals, as I share in this section. These same statements, however, also serve to illustrate the limits and narrow focus of eco-justice's commitment to non-human creaturely life. In his work on the foundations of ecotheology, Panu Pihkala writes that "early ecotheologians did not focus much on animal theology, thus participating in that [human/animal] divide that has long continued between these areas of theology."<sup>111</sup> Absent significant reflections on nonhuman animal to build on, eco-justice theology tends to miss the mark in detailing the moral worth of creatures beyond the human. Claims about nonhuman animals within larger statements about the values and aims of the eco-justice movement mostly speak about animals *only* as species, and not about individual animals. Language related to nonhuman animals values them as part of eco-systems, part of the whole of creation. Most eco-justice scholars make no detailed mention of animals in their work. Of those that do, many include some caveat as to why individual animals cannot be the focus of eco-justice work, as I show below. Repeatedly, broad claims about non-human creation have no substance beyond protecting the diversity of species.

I turn first to Hessel, whose prolific praxis-focused eco-justice writings include commentary on the role of animals. Hessel begins promisingly, calling on the church to recognize that "all created" are interdependent and need to be freed from injustice, but the church has not sufficiently responded to this broader-than-human view of who should be the focus of advocacy. The church has been a champion of economic justice, and has

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<sup>111</sup> Pihkala, "Rediscovery of Early Twentieth-Century Ecotheology," 280.

not paid enough attention to ecological justice, he argues.<sup>112</sup> However, when Hessel moves toward specific action plans, his advocacy approach is vague. Among a list of responsibilities he gives to churches in the work of eco-justice, Hessel calls for the development of an “ethic of respect for all creatures and careful stewardship of every place.”<sup>113</sup> Caring for non-human creatures, then, is lumped together with caring for the land itself, grouped in a way that makes attention to non-human animals seem more similar to attention to protecting soil, water, and trees than to protecting humans from the impacts of ecological devastation.

As mentioned above, Hessel points to the Earth Charter as a sign of the eco-justice movement influencing the larger field of environmentalism. Underscoring the importance given to the document by eco-justice leaders, Gibson’s *Eco-Justice* reader includes the Earth Charter in its entirety. The first principle of the Earth Charter speaks of respecting the diversity of life on earth. The Charter calls on people to “recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.”<sup>114</sup> A sub-section titled “Treat All Living Beings with Respect and Consideration” speaks against cruelty to “animals kept in human society,” speaks for protection of wild animals from hunting and other activities that result in suffering, and advocates for “[avoiding] or [eliminating] to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.”<sup>115</sup> This is the most specific animal-focused

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<sup>112</sup> Hessel, "Eco-Justice and Theology," 10.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>114</sup> Gibson, *Eco-justice - the Unfinished Journey*, 277.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 282.

advocacy recommendation I have encountered that is directly connected with the eco-justice movement, and notably, it is the work *not* of eco-justice advocates within the church, but instead the product of the Earth Charter Commission, which reaches far beyond the scope of the church.

Gibson's own contributions show the dissonance between theological claims that include nonhuman animals, but then eventually reveal the limits of that inclusion. In the opening to Part II, "Eco-Justice Issues," of Gibson's *Eco-justice* reader, he writes of the "twofold" importance of the natural world. The natural world *is* important for humans, he argues, since humans draw their life from nature, but it is also valuable for "its own sake." He elaborates, "The nonhuman forms of life have a Creator-endowed right to their place and role in the evolutionary process without the uncaring human intervention that ruins their habitat and threatens or perpetuates their extinction."<sup>116</sup> Similarly, in an introductory comment to another section of the reader titled "Creatures, Systems, and Sense of Place," Gibson again stresses the importance of caring for all of creation for itself, writing, "In the emphasis of eco-justice on sustainability as a value and a goal we have sought consistently to go beyond anthropocentrism - that is, not only value nature for the sake of human beings, but to recognize and honor the claim of myriad and diverse creatures to be valued for their own sake."<sup>117</sup>

Despite this claim, however, on the very next page, Gibson, summarizing ordained Presbyterian clergyperson and ethicist Holmes Rolston III's chapter in the volume (which I discuss below), emphasizes that human duty toward animals is "not the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 129.

same thing as showing compassion toward individual animals. The forces of nature drive for the preservation of the species. Humans have a duty not to disrupt the ecosystemic processes essential to the diverse kinds of animals and plants.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, the obligation that humans have toward animals is only to protect the eco-systems in which animals live from harm. Additionally, on many occasions when Gibson addresses nonhuman animals, they are simply lumped together in a group with everything nonhuman – animals, plants, and land are all considered part of one group: “creation.”<sup>119</sup> He ponders, “What does our human honoring of the nonhuman mean in practice? What does it mean for our relations to animals, plants, and natural systems?”<sup>120</sup> Yet, Gibson does not give any clear, specific responses other than encouraging humans to let non-domesticated animals live freely.

Holmes Rolston III wrote animals-themed chapters for edited volumes by both Gibson and Hessel, lending his authority to the eco-justice movement’s understanding of animals.<sup>121</sup> Rolston’s interpretation of the place of animals in the eco-justice movement is also cited as authoritative by eco-justice historian Dana Horrell.<sup>122</sup> In the essay by Rolston in *Eco-Justice* which occasioned Gibson’s comment above, Rolston is explicit in revealing that individual nonhuman animals are not a part of the vision of eco-justice.

Rolston argues that while rescuing individuals from cruel treatment is “humane enough”

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>119</sup> See pages 86 and 131 for examples. Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>121</sup> I undertake a more extensive review of Rolston’s holist perspective, along with that of philosopher J. Baird Callicott, in Chapter 4.

<sup>122</sup> Horrell, "Reclaiming the Covenant," 338, fn 22.

and “does not seem to have any detrimental effects,” that it is better to act towards animals based on principles that “can be universalized,” and apply them to “populations, herds,” species of animals.<sup>123</sup> Although a Christian ethic might cause us to protect *some* individual animals, Rolston, consistent with a holist environmental philosophy, adopts a “hands off” ethic for “wild” animals – one should “appreciate their wildness.”<sup>124</sup>

Rolston addresses the Endangered Species Act (ESA),<sup>125</sup> reporting that the Endangered Species Committee, an interagency government body which works to determine the validity of claims related to the ESA, was “almost at once ... nicknamed ‘the God committee.’” He concludes, “The [nickname] mixes jest with theological insight and reveals that religious value is implicitly lurking in the Act. Any who decide to destroy species take, fearfully, the prerogative of God.”<sup>126</sup> Again, Rolston clearly links the eco-justice ethic with a duty toward *species* of animals, which is important, but

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<sup>123</sup> Rolston III, "Duties to Animals," 136.

<sup>124</sup> Rolston asserts that any ethic of compassion towards individual animals must be set in the “big picture,” an approach he applies both to wild and domesticated animals. For example, he describes an example of a herd of bighorn sheep at Yellowstone National Park who suffered from pinkeye, an easily treatable disease. Some wildlife veterinarians wanted to treat the sheep for the easily curable disease that put the sheep at risk from predators. Others argued that helping the sheep “would have weakened the species.” Reviewing the case in his essay, Rolston agrees. While pain is bad for both humans and for sheep he says, humans should perhaps not interfere in the pain that sheep experience because a more genetically fit species of sheep will emerge through the pain (and presumably death) of weakened individual animals. “Simply to ask whether they [wild animals] suffer is not enough. We must ask whether they suffer with a beneficial effect on the wild population,” he concludes. In other words, the pain in the “ecosystem” from a less-than-its-best species outweighs pain for individual sheep. *Ibid.*, 135-36. This article is reprinted from *The Egg: An Eco-Justice Quarterly* 13 (3), Summer 1993).

<sup>125</sup> Notably, the ESA is the only legislation directly related to advocacy for nonhuman animals that most UMC advocacy staff I interviewed could recall addressing in their work. I address this in chapter \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>126</sup> Rolston III, "Duties to Animals," 139.

inadequate. Care for individual animals as subjects in their own right is entirely subordinated to claims of the “ecosystem” for Rolston.<sup>127</sup>

Examining biblical texts related to animals, Rolston contends that while the central concern of the scriptures are human affairs, animals still have a place both in the biblical covenants and as a focus of “moral relationships.” The scriptures explicitly support “animal husbandry” as “compatible with Christian faith,” and eating meat as “not incompatible with monotheistic faith.”<sup>128</sup> Using the Noah’s Ark narrative to advocate again for the protection of endangered species, Rolston writes, “Although individual animals perish in the Flood, God is concerned for preservation at the level of species.”<sup>129</sup> Of course, individual humans perish in the flood, but Rolston does not apply his logic here to assume that God is only interested in the preservation of the human species rather than in individual humans. As he states in the opening words of his chapter, “Christianity is a religion for people.”<sup>130</sup>

Rolston does reject notions that species of animals are only valuable as far as they are useful to humans. “Humanity is not the measure of things,” he writes, suggesting that a human-centric view for species preservation is immature. Nonetheless, his devaluing of the individual animal is starkly stated in a list of strategies for an eco-justice ethic of

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<sup>127</sup> I return to the tension between consideration of individual animals and species preservation in ecosystems in Chapter 4.

<sup>128</sup> Rolston III, "Duties to Animals," 132.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 133.

wildland and wildlife that concludes his chapter: “Respect life, the species more than the individual.”<sup>131</sup>

In Hessel’s edited volume *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-justice and Theology*, Rolston again contributes an animals-focused chapter. His statements about the place of animals here are even more blunt and limiting. Only humans are made in God’s image, he says, and they are “placed over, not under,” nonhuman creatures and creation. Humans are to experience freedom. Nonhuman animals are fit for their specific locations and habitats. Animals “cannot take an interest in sectors of the world other than [their] own,” he proclaims, while humans are interested in the whole world. Because of this, humans “should speak for God in natural history” and “should rule creation in freedom and in love.”<sup>132</sup> Rolston is direct and unwavering. Both ethically and theologically, only species of animals matter. Individual animals are not of particular concern.

Beyond Hessel, Gibson, and Rolston, a smattering of other voices speak to animals and anthropocentrism in the eco-justice movement. South African ecotheologian Ernst Conradie reflects on the theological contributions of the 1980s South African Belhar Confession from the Reformed tradition, which emerged alongside the ecumenical movement and the growing eco-justice movement. Looking back at the post-Apartheid quest for truth, he asks whether a theological focus on restorative justice can be wide enough in scope to include an eco-justice focus, or whether such justice theology remains anthropocentric. He seeks after justice that can respond not only to injustice towards

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>132</sup> Holmes Rolston III, "Wildlife and Wildlands: A Christian Perspective," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 123-24.

humans, but also injustice and violence that impacts “the intrinsic worth of other animals.” Conradie wonders whether the eco-justice movement can respond to the breadth of oppression and violence against all creatures.<sup>133</sup>

As with Conradie in the previous section of this chapter, Jeff Todd Titan, a professor of music who focuses on social responsibility, sustainability, and ecomusicology, argues that “ecojustice is more inclusive” than environmental justice because it is “ecocentric, not anthropocentric.” Still, Titan seems to sense that eco-justice does not always quite fulfill the non-anthropocentric promise, since in his next paragraph he argues that if eco-justice claims to be justice for “the earth and all its beings,” then it “might do well to consider these beings – including plants, nonhuman animals, landforms, and so forth – *as persons*, with the justice and rights persons deserve.”<sup>134</sup>

Theologian George H. Kehm, another contributor to Hessel’s edited volume, seeks to challenge problematic anthropocentrism in Christian theology, offering the eco-justice framework as a better alternative. He contrasts negative constructions of anthropocentrism with an eco-justice worldview that includes “all species, eco-systems, and the entire biotic community” as targets of God’s redemptive work.<sup>135</sup> He is straightforward in his pronouncement that a narrow theological vision that limits salvation to one species – humans - is “unbiblical.” Salvation must be salvation for all of creation, and humans cannot achieve salvation apart from the whole of creation.<sup>136</sup> Kehm

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<sup>133</sup> Conradie, "Limits to Justice, Ecojustice, and Climate Justice?," 5.

<sup>134</sup> Titan, "Ecojustice, Religious Folklife and a Sound Ecology," 105.

<sup>135</sup> George H. Kehm, "The New Story: Redemption as Fulfillment of Creation," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 89.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

claims the intrinsic value of all creatures as central to eco-justice. Drawing on the writings of John Calvin, however, Kehm still groups together plants and animals in his consideration, offering no particulars on what it means for the non-human part of creation to receive salvation.<sup>137</sup>

Despite the holistic environmentalism ethos shared by several of the eco-justice movement's early leaders, other voices do criticize the ways in which the movement does not live into its stated values. For example, in an essay in Hessel's 1985 edited volume *For Creation's Sake*, Episcopalian eco-feminist scholar Elizabeth Dodson Gray engages in critique of the young movement. Reflecting on an early gathering of eco-justice leaders and activists, Dodson notes that the call to the conference named many "eco-justice issues," like hunger and environmentalism. However, she notes that "the women's movement" was absent from advertising for the event, despite the clear connections between women's rights and care for the earth, and despite the contributions of several women who were Dodson Gray's contemporaries to the environmental movement.<sup>138</sup> Dodson Gray continues, shifting her focus to nonhuman animals, addressing common attitudes towards animals drawn from an uncritical interpretation of "dominion" from the scriptures. "Most of us call pets and other animals subhuman – not nonhuman – and we assume we can train animals, torture them for our medical experiments, do horrible things to them as we raise them to be our food. We can relate to cats, dogs, horses in terms of personalities with consciousness. They are at least more like us."<sup>139</sup> We have

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>138</sup> Elizabeth Dodson Gray, "A Critique of Dominion Theology," in *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, ecology, & justice*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1985), 71-72.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 78.

confused human uniqueness with superiority, she argues.<sup>140</sup> Although she does not offer specific eco-justice actions related to animals, she is nearly the only voice in the volume speaking for the individual experiences of animals without qualifying her statements or emphasizing species over individual.

Lutheran historian and theologian H. Paul Santmire gives the most sustained attention to the theological underpinnings of an eco-justice perspective on more than human creation, examining and challenging dominion theology. In a chapter in Hessel's *After Nature's Revolt*, Santmire argues that most of Protestant nature theology has centered on the idea that humans have dominion over the earth.<sup>141</sup> Dominion inevitably embodies a "spirit of domination," as "the human creature ... is never responsible *to* nature as a genuine other, but is typically responsible *for* nature as a dependent other." This logic of "responsible *for* but not *to*" is the same logic that theologians have employed against women, Santmire argues, depriving women of their own integrity apart from men.<sup>142</sup> Santmire finds this same lack of true acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of creation even within organizations like the WCC. While highlighting the WCC's focus on "the integrity of creation," Santmire simultaneously critiques the WCC for simply emphasizing a just distribution of the earth's resources, rather than more deeply reflecting on nature's intrinsic value, nature's "own life." He calls eco-justice advocates

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>141</sup> H. Paul Santmire, "Healing the Protestant Mind: Beyond the Theology of Human Dominion," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 57.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 73.

too nervous or unsure to advocate more clearly for nature in its own right.<sup>143</sup>

Protestantism's inability to separate a concept of dominion from a creeping claim of domination suggests to Santmire that even the concept of dominion is perhaps best left behind.<sup>144</sup>

Santmire explicitly critiques theologies of justice that overlook a connection to ecology, noting that while liberation theologies, for example, are "historicized, humanistic theologies par excellence," such theologies show little care for environmental matters *except* as related to the imbalanced spread of earth's resources among various groups of people. As others have noted, Santmire too mentions that liberation activists have sometimes had just reason for skepticism toward appeals to nature that can be employed to reify oppressive social structures. "A concern to save the whales, for example, might just be a subterfuge, consciously intended or not, to distract the public from focusing attention on the shocking numbers of children dying in our cities."<sup>145</sup> Santmire explicitly mentions vegetarianism and animal research at the conclusion of his conversation about Barthian theology. He mentions both practices only in passing, however, saying that he is not closing conversation on such topics.<sup>146</sup>

Santmire does return to address nonhuman animals in his own book, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*.<sup>147</sup> Although this

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>147</sup> H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

work does not address the eco-justice movement in denominational contexts, it shows Santmire's deeper engagement with nonhuman animals. Wrestling with the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2, Santmire returns to problematic interpretations of dominion theology: Dominion language "must be read in the context of [the] all-pervading, harmonious world of *shalom*" in Genesis 1, which "presupposes a world where the humans and the animals enjoy a marked commonality and where the Creator clearly has purpose for the whole creation that transcend instrumental human needs."<sup>148</sup> Genesis 2 implies animals' "comradeship" with humans, even mutual "friendship and self-giving."<sup>149</sup> Santmire includes a call to action for animals. He writes,

Christians must again be at the forefront of those who advocate [on] behalf of the humane treatment of animals—both wild and cultivated - in the spirit of St. Francis and the early English Methodists, who helped to give the movement to protect animals from abuse its first historic impetus. Should we not live in a world that seeks to befriend all animals, in appropriate ways? The Church must be at the forefront of those who persistently keep raising this question.<sup>150</sup>

Santmire does not specify what "appropriate ways" of befriending animals might look like, but his words leave potential for advocacy for the individual lives of nonhuman animals. He does return to his previously raised consideration vegetarianism, although only in a footnote. He says,

I leave open the question of vegetarianism ... with this simple caveat: in light of the biblical witness to *shalom* as our rightful relationship with animals, the burden of proof would seem to rest squarely on the shoulders of any Christian who chooses to eat meat, except for reasons of health or survival. This is only to touch

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 124.

lightly, however, on a highly complicated and advanced theological discussion about animals and animal rights.<sup>151</sup>

Santmire seems unwilling to explicitly tie vegetarianism and eco-justice theology together, although it seems clear that his personal sentiments favor the practice of abstaining from eating meat out of regard for the lives of individual animals.

Ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether's essay in her co-edited 2000 volume with Hessel, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, stands apart from other eco-justice scholarship on animals, pointing to the critical role played by ecofeminism in drawing attention to the more-than-human world. In the concluding chapter, "Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission," Ruether seeks to retrieve a biblical narrative that rejects the dualistic perspective of disdain of the material world, in favor of a theology that emphasizes the goodness of creation and creatures' material bodies.<sup>152</sup> She touches directly on animal rights, tracing the expansion of the understanding of the "idea of rights" in Christian history. Some Christians "began to claim that rights should be extended to animals" in the nineteenth century, she says. Abusive treatment should be banned, "whether towards humans in prisons, schools, armies or hospitals, or toward animals in laboratories or farms."<sup>153</sup> Ruether points out that both environmentalists and animal rights activist are drawing on the same tradition of "natural rights," seeking to expand rights either to ecosystems or animals or both. Yet,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>152</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dieter T. Hessel (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), 603.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 609.

she argues, “protecting an animal or a plant because it is a member of an endangered species with a right to be is susceptible to autarchic misinterpretation. Species are not endangered in isolation ... Ecological communities are the context in which particular animals or plants thrive or die.”<sup>154</sup> Calling for the expression of eco-justice theology in the “teaching, worship, and praxis” of the Christian church, Ruether says the church needs “to create a new socioeconomic incarnation of the human species within its earth matrix.”<sup>155</sup> Ruether’s chapter, which blends both affirmation of the holist philosophy of attention to eco-systems, while centering the value of each individual creature, demonstrates the important contributions of an ecofeminist perspective to the eco-justice perspective. Unfortunately, Ruether’s nuanced way of articulating the value of human and nonhuman creation sets her apart rather than within the rest of the eco-justice movement. I return to ecofeminism’s importance in providing challenge, corrective, and vision for a reimagined eco-justice movement in Chapter 5.

As I have shown, though many eco-justice voices touch on issues related to nonhuman animals, most neglect any meaningful engagement with the lives of actual individual animals. Animals are a topic of concern as species, as parts of eco-systems, and as entities that exist more closely alongside plants and land formations rather than alongside human animals. Even as species, animals are brushed aside in favor of more pressing human concerns. Gibson writes about the need for “a new paradigm, a new set of assumptions, standards, values, and habits” for a new era of the world, in which people

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 613.

acknowledge that the earth is finite and that “justice must be eco-justice.”<sup>156</sup> As eco-justice seeks to create a new, broader justice paradigm for the earth and its creatures, can the eco-justice movement itself make way for new paradigms and values when it comes to nonhuman animals?

In the next chapter, I turn to a case study in The United Methodist Church. Before I can return to Gibson’s question and my own, I seek to demonstrate how the concerns I have raised in this chapter appear in practice. How are eco-justice theoethics applied in the denominational context? How do broad claims about species of animals translate into legislative policy and advocacy at denominational and local church levels? I will show evidence of problematic anthropocentrism in church polity, trace the convergence of eco-justice and environmental justice advocacy, and reveal the significant lack of attention to nonhuman animals that reflects the eco-justice movement principle discussed here. Seeing eco-justice theoethics in practice, I can then turn to possibilities for a new eco-justice paradigm.

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<sup>156</sup> Gibson, "Eco-justice," 27.

## CHAPTER TWO: CASE STUDY

### ECO-JUSTICE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

In a hierarchy of environmentalists, says Paz Artaza-Regan, former staffer at the General Board of Church and Society, stargazers are at the top. They look at creation and think “Wow!” They stop there, however, and take no action. A lot of the Christian church is in this group, Artaza-Regan says. Next are the tree huggers. They want to protect the forest and the ocean. They have the awe of the first group, plus an awareness of ecosystems. Next are the fishers and hunters. They have the awe, and an awareness of ecosystems, and they want to protect what they use and what they need, but without thinking of the common good for everyone. At the bottom, though, are those who are “down here,” communities that everyone else sees as disposable. They are deeply impacted by the environment. Who will the church be with “down here?” asks Artaza-Regan. We have to have a preference for those “down here,” she concludes.<sup>1</sup> To Artaza-Regan, this preference has previously meant an emphasis on marginalized people groups, but increasingly, she sees the eco-justice movement expanding to better emphasize the voices of the nonhuman as well.

Is there a place for non-human animals in mainline Protestant environmentalism? In this chapter, I seek to answer that question, in the context of a broader inquiry into the eco-justice movement within The United Methodist Church. Having thoroughly examined the positions and claims of the eco-justice theoethical framework, with special attention to eco-justice’s perspective on anthropocentrism, the place of nonhuman

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<sup>1</sup> Paz Artaza-Regan, in interview with Beth Quick, Zoom, May 22, 2024.

animals, and eco justice's relationship to the environmental justice movement, Chapter 2 now applies these eco-justice principles to a case study. Using The UMC context, I further examine my claims about anthropocentrism and inattention to the rights of animals outside a broad concern for species of animals.

The case study traces major legislative actions and polity statements made by The United Methodist Church at the denominational (General Church) level, as well as actions and advocacy from both official and unofficial church groups, including some denominational boards and agencies, and some caucus groups. Through the case study, I show the prevalence of anthropocentrism in official church polity. I highlight the connections between eco-justice driven legislation and environmental justice advocacy goals. I also note both the handful of unsuccessful attempts by various bodies to introduce animals-focused legislation into UMC polity, and the dominant mentions of nonhuman animals that refer exclusively to species of animals or simply group animals with the rest of nonhuman creation. As I study these aspects of the eco-justice movement in practice in The UMC, I draw attention to ways in which the institutional power of the denomination shapes the direction of its environmentalism.

I begin with a thorough review of the 1972 General Conference (GC) and the leadup to the gathering, when the Social Principles were first adopted as the major social justice stance of The United Methodist Church. Because so much time and attention were given to the initial crafting of the Social Principles, which have endured with a remarkable degree of core content preserved over the last fifty years, detailed focus on the 1972 General Conference is vital. Then, I examine some broad theological claims about environmental concerns made at the denominational level, whether through the

speeches of episcopal leaders at General Conference or through adopted eco-justice legislative initiatives, looking for the sentiments about care for God's creation that undergird The UMC's advocacy.

In the next section, I begin by reviewing two major themes in The UMC's eco-justice polity, noting how each theme interacts with attention (or lack thereof) to nonhuman animals in distinctive ways. I share a careful study of the denomination's actions that directly address nonhuman animals, including legislative actions, a focus on The UMC's work with the Endangered Species Act, and instances where nonhuman animals are deployed as metaphors to address issues around human sexuality. I follow this with explorations of The UMC's agricultural work, and its work on environmental racism and toxics.

Following the study of the role of nonhuman animals in the denomination's policies, I briefly look at the unfolding of a counter-environmental movement and backlash to the eco-justice movement led by internal and external agitators, assessing its impact on eco-justice efforts in the denomination. I also examine patterns of funding and staffing for eco-justice efforts in The UMC, highlighting connections between available resources and success of social change efforts.

Next, I discuss partnerships in the denomination's eco-justice work: the General Board of Church and Society's partnership with advocacy groups, the work of caucus groups like the Methodist Federation for Social Action and Fossil Free UMC, as well as individuals and other institutional change agents in the work of eco-justice. I consider the strategies groups like caucuses use to achieve their goals, working for change within the

larger denomination. In the next chapter, I will engage further with the work of caucuses as agents of social change.

Finally, I detail the Revised Social Principles, adopted at the 2020/2024 General Conference, the first wholesale revision of the Social Principles since their introduction in 1972. As I describe the revisioning process and changes to the denomination's environmental language, including language about nonhuman animals, I turn toward larger questions about denominational and social change that I explore in Chapter 3.

To engage in a thorough case study, I spent time reviewing archival materials from General Conference sessions, including petitions, actions of legislative sessions, and the minutes from the plenary sessions. I studied material from the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and its predecessor bodies, including staff reports and correspondence and board meeting minutes. I researched documents from both the official ecumenical advocacy group, the Eco-Justice Working Group (EJWG, discussed in the previous chapter), and from the long history of MFSA, which functions alongside but not officially as part of The UMC. I also read official publications from the denomination like *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Resolutions*, and from caucus groups, like MFSA's *Social Questions Bulletin*. Aside from archival research, interviews which include current and former staff members at GBCS, a former executive director of MFSA, the founder of Fossil Free UMC, a principle leader in the Social Principles Revisioning Task Force, an eco-justice advocate working at the Annual Conference level, and current and former staff members of the Eco-Justice Working Group and its

successor body, Creation Justice Ministries all add to this portrait.<sup>2</sup> These interviews enabled me to fill in details around archival material that I reviewed. Interview subjects helped me interpret documents and their narratives help to better understand the work behind the official polity actions that place the environmental movement in The UMC within the larger social justice advocacy framework of the denomination.

### Foundations: The Origins of the Social Principles

The UMC's official social advocacy work is deeply connected to the denomination's Social Principles, short position statements on a wide range of social issues. The Social Principles are the core document describing the social views of the denomination, and they form the basis of The UMC's entire social action work. As mentioned in the introduction, the first Social Principles were presented, debated, and adopted at the 1972 General Conference, a quadrennium after the uniting conference between The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren, as the new United Methodist Church undertook the task of crafting important statements about its identity and purpose. The Social Principles, in turn, served as the foundation for *The Book of Resolutions*, a book containing all the longer advocacy statements and social issue position statements for the denomination.

A special session of the General Conference met in 1970 to continue the work of the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren, at which the Social Principles Study Commission made an interim report to the conference on the

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<sup>2</sup> Some interview material has already appeared in Chapter 1, and I also weave interview material into later chapters in this dissertation.

progress of their work. Bishop James S. Thomas of the Iowa area, chair of the team who worked on the language of the Social Principles, reported that the Commission had a sense that urgent social issues were “literally exploding all around us” as they did their work. “[T]he world is literally hanging under the threat of extinction,” wrote Bishop Thomas.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the Commission, through engagement with listening sessions across the denomination, surfaced ecology, pollution, and population as emerging environmental stewardship issues to which The UMC should attend.<sup>4</sup>

In 1972, the Study Commission then presented their completed work to General Conference delegates for action. Although the draft Social Principles were altered in legislative committees at General Conference, only twelve suggested changes were eventually adopted on the plenary floor. Mostly, the work of the Commission was adopted as presented by the full body. Many sections of the proposed principles were debated by delegates in plenary sessions,<sup>5</sup> but “The Natural World” section of the

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<sup>3</sup> Donald K. Gorrell, "The Social Creed and Methodism through Eighty Years," in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Robert Mullin and Russell Richey (Dorset: Kingswood Books, 1993), 398.

<sup>4</sup> James S. Thomas, *Social Principles and the 1972 General Conference* (UM Archives, Madison, NJ, July 31 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Tracking the debate of a particular petition or topics at past General Conferences can be a challenging task. The Daily Christian Advocate (DCA) is a daily newspaper distributed each day of General Conference, which includes verbatim transcripts of plenary sessions. Delegates also receive reports and preparation materials in special editions called the Advanced Daily Christian Advocate (ADCA). The Journals of General Conference Sessions, which also include verbatim transcripts, are the official records of the General Conference plenaries and adopted legislation. However, there are no records of the conversations and debate that took place within legislative sessions at General Conference, particularly before recent years when technology has made recording and documentation easier. Thus, how delegates view specific petitions is sometimes discernible only by tracking whether petitions were recommended for concurrence, concurrence with amendments, or nonconcurrence to the larger body. (Work on the petitions submitted to General Conference takes place in several legislative committees during the first days of the gathering. Legislative committees recommend action on petitions to the full body. When the legislative committees cannot reach significant agreement on a petition, the petition is then debated by the full body of delegates.) Amended petitions particularly grant insight into areas of a proposal debated by delegates. Aside from noting legislative committee actions, only petitions which are debated by the full body of General Conference delegates give a glimpse into the nature of the conversations on particular topics.

principles, containing all statements related to ecological care, was approved with only one amendment on the floor that went undebated, which changed just one word in the introductory paragraph from "maintained" to "conserved." The revised sentence then read: "Air, water, soil, minerals, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and *conserved* because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings." The presenters accepted the proposed change, and there was no conversation recorded or reasoning given for the language change.<sup>6</sup>

The revised Natural World section included just three subtopics: Water, Air, Soil, Minerals, and Plants; Animal Life; and Space. The short paragraph on animals was just two sentences long. The statement read, "Animal Life – We support regulations that protect the life and health of animals, including those ensuring the humane treatment of pets and other domestic animals, and the painless slaughtering of meat animals, fish, and fowl. Furthermore, we encourage the preservation of animal species now threatened with extinction."<sup>7</sup> This brief statement includes the potential for attention to individual animals, mentioning domestic animals slaughtered for food and mentioning the protection of pets. The General Conference (GC), however, adopted no corresponding resolutions or recommendations for action related to these concerns.

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Typically, only the petitions with significant disagreements among committee members are heard on the plenary floor.

<sup>6</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Journal*, 467, emphasis mine. The reasons for the amendment are unclear, however, the word "conservation" is often contrasted with "preservation" in environmental conversations, with the former referring to sustainable, managed use of natural resources, and the latter indicating the protection of natural resources from human intervention.

<sup>7</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Discipline*, Paragraph 71B.

Despite the lack of debate on the floor about the Social Principles, growing global awareness of environmental concerns was evident at the 1972 GC in other ways. A delegate named Leo L. Baker, for example, spoke on the floor to comment on a different section of the proposed Social Principle which contained a paragraph on population. He complained about the brevity of the statement on what he called “the population explosion.” He felt the paragraph misstated “the fact of what populations do.” “We are all polluters,” he said. “I am a polluter, every one of us in this room is a polluter, and no one is more of a polluter than another person. We are all polluters. We are all involved in this. I feel like that we have made an understatement of the population position.”<sup>8</sup> He stopped short, however, of proposing any amendment to the text.

Another delegate, John B. Howes from Central Pennsylvania, made a resolution from the floor to acknowledge Earth Week by recommitting to care for the earth. The General Conference session was held during Earth Week which had been established just two years earlier in 1970. Howes’ resolution stated in part:

Whereas, We seek constantly to express our concerns as stewards of the material resources with which our world has been blessed, Be It Resolved that this General Conference of The United Methodist Church reaffirm our dedication to the care of God’s holy earth, together with the air that surrounds us and the waters of our streams and seas that all life, human and nonhuman, be nourished by its riches.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking to his resolution, Howes said that Earth Week had little support when it was established, but that a time had come “when people of all parts of our society are attempting to make a hopeful expression of our concern.” Some people “have been

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<sup>8</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Journal*, 467.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

working away at [environmental issues]” for sixty years, Howes argued, and he felt that “we could not let Earth Week come to an end without our having expressed ourselves, our concern about this matter.” The resolution was adopted without debate.<sup>10</sup>

The 1972 General Conference also passed a resolution related to the newly adopted “The Natural World” Social Principles, approving a statement for the *Book of Resolutions* titled “Environmental Stewardship,” submitted by the General Board of Christian Social Concerns and the National Division of the Board of Missions (predecessor bodies of the General Board of Church and Society and General Board of Global Ministries). The resolution affirmed the “intrinsic value” of God’s creation, noted the threat of species loss, and drew attention to the increasing imposition on “people and animals to enjoy wilderness areas and uncluttered landscapes.”<sup>11</sup> Just one petition focused entirely on animals: a petition titled “Kindness to Animals” was submitted by Bennett Wm. Palmer of the Florida Conference.<sup>12</sup> In the petition, Palmer requested that local churches keep track of reports of animal cruelty, and establish liaisons with local Humane Societies, an action he considered as “something in the spirit of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> The petition was not adopted.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 833, 38, 50. I describe the importance of this resolution more in the next section.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 840. Rev. Bennett Wm. Palmer continued to offer petitions supporting kindness to nonhuman animals for multiple quadrennia. Curious about his motivations, I reviewed several folders of materials written by Palmer at the United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ. Palmer was very interested in mystical Christianity, and he viewed animals as a means of experiencing a mystical union with Christ. He did not seem to otherwise be a “typical” animal advocate – he was never, outside of his petitions to Annual Conference, writing about issues of animal welfare.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett Wm. Palmer, Kindness to Animals, 1972, Christian Social Concerns: A5001-A5757, records of the General Conference, 7: United Methodist Church Archives.

The 1972 General Conference, with its adoption of the Social Principles and accompanying resolutions laid a foundation for the eco-justice movement in The UMC for the decades that followed. The relatively short length of the Social Principles combined with the breadth rather than specificity of the Principles have made the Social Principles highly deployable as guiding values for The UMC's social justice witness, including its eco-justice work. Crafted during a season of cultural change, coming on the heels of the first Earth Day, and in a season when a sense of creation's fragility was fore in people's minds, the Social Principles captured the theoethical commitments of the denomination to act for the care of the planet. More than fifty years later, the Social Principles remain the denomination's most important statement, guiding UMC social action around the globe.

After the 1972 General Conference, ecological concerns began appearing in petitions and policies where ecology was *not* the primary focus, reflecting a growing understanding that creation care should be part of every aspect of the church's activities. For example, by GC 1980, environmental concerns appeared in resolutions on Native Americans and on Africa, in statements on safety and health in the workplace, and workers' compensation, in resolution on health care and on drugs and alcohol, and in a list of responsibilities assigned to the General Board of Discipleship.<sup>14</sup> By 2016, the words "environment" and "environmental" appeared hundreds of times in proposed legislation, not limited to resolutions related only to The Natural World, but at least

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<sup>14</sup> For example, a resolution titled "The United Methodist Church and America's Native People" asserted that Americans must be disabused of false beliefs about Native peoples in the U.S., including the false idea that "Natives were not good stewards of the environment, permitting nature to lie in waste." The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1980 General Conference of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), 787, 811, 14, 1004, 335, 834.

mentioned in legislation across advocacy areas, a sign of the growing understanding of the intersection between environmental justice and other justice efforts.<sup>15</sup> These additions of environmental topics to other areas of church polity and the expansion of language throughout General Conference action show the increasing strength of eco-justice concerns. Eco-justice theology seeks to fully integrate ecological justice with economic, racial, and gender justice, and General Conference legislation shows strides toward embodying those eco-justice goals.

### Ecotheology at General Conference

Over the years of General Conferences after the introduction of the Social Principles, environmental concerns did not often come to the plenary floor for discussion. Other social issues - like proposed legislation around LGBTQ+ inclusion, abortion, and racial justice – proved much more divisive or controversial and garnered the most time and attention during legislative sessions. Some standout moments from episcopal and denominational leaders through the decades, however, give a sense both of the unfolding ecotheology articulated by denominational leadership, and the resistance initially expressed by some leaders who did not consider eco-justice concerns to be central to the denomination’s mission.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate*, vol. Volume 1 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), various. In contrast to the mentions of “environment” and “environmental,” the word “animal” was mentioned 33 times, with animals most often included in a list with other parts of nonhuman creation like plant life, continuing the pattern from earlier General Conferences.

<sup>16</sup> In United Methodism, bishops do not have a vote at General Conference – they are not elected delegates. They still hold considerable power, however, for shaping the tone of the denomination by

At GC 1972, various speeches and sermons from denominational bishops suggest that even while eco-justice emerged as an area of concern, some people – even the highest leaders in the denomination - felt conflicted about the merits of both eco-justice and other growing areas of theological and ethical inquiry in church and society. The Episcopal Address, a speech on the state of the church, was delivered by one of the active bishops, Bishop F. Gerald Ensley of the West Ohio Conference. He sought to undermine some kinds of “dogmatic” environmentalists (as well as the work of racial justice and anti-war activism) in his address:

We recognize the social concern in the Church is not an unmixed blessing. There is as much dogmatism in the pulpit now on social issues as when orthodoxy was in flower ... we have congregations whose sabbath portion is a discussion of the war in Vietnam, or the latest racial demonstration, or the next election, or the most recent word from the high priests of ecology, and who rarely hear the note of personal penitence, or of divine pardon, or of holiness of life, or of the world to come.<sup>17</sup>

Prominent United Methodist theologian Albert Outler, when presenting the work of the Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, also made some backhanded comments.<sup>18</sup> While insisting that the commission was considering “all the various emergent theological viewpoints” included in The UMC, he named “hope” and

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prioritizing – or neglecting – particular social issues. Thus, what the bishops say or do not say about a Christian response to environmental crisis is influential, even if not binding on legislative decisions.

<sup>17</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Journal*, 212.

<sup>18</sup> Outler was a noted scholar of John Wesley, editing collections of Wesley’s sermons and other works, which remain popular decades after their publication. Outler is remembered for his formulation of Wesley’s theology in a tool known as “the Wesley quadrilateral,” which encourages Christians to live out their faith with a foundation of scripture, along with tradition, reason, and experience. Outler taught at Duke Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, and Perkins School of Theology. "Outler Was a Great Wesley Scholar - and a Pack Rat," United Methodist News Service, 2015, accessed 15 February, 2026, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/opening-the-door-to-albert-outler>.

“ecology” alongside “‘process theology,’ ‘development theology,’ ‘linguistic analysis,’ ‘existentialism,’ [and] the ‘new transcendentalisms’” as “special-interest theologies in current fashion.”<sup>19</sup>

Outler’s tone of skepticism about the endurance of or need for ecotheology was echoed by other leaders. A “Devotional Address” given by Wisconsin Area Bishop Ralph T. Alton titled, “Always Remember Jesus,” included an acknowledgment of the emerging awareness of ecological concerns, but expressed in an ambivalent tone: Alton described ecology having “no other motivation than self-preservation,” which is hardly a commendation, but he also admitted that “selfish interest is the very motivation that has brought much of the ecological problem upon us.” Presciently, he did call for a “sense of the stewardship of life” lest promises of “new forms of manipulation of natural resources” to “postpone the disastrous outcome beyond our own time of concern” lull people into inaction.<sup>20</sup> Another “Devotional Address” shared by Bishop Thomas M. Pryor of the Chicago Area, “A Time for Proclamation,” called out the church acquiescing to culture, failing to prevent actions like power companies gaining seats on statewide pollution boards, but at the same time he chided social activists for forgetting “the whole gospel” and “denying the breadth of the gospel” by focusing only on social action.<sup>21</sup> These speeches show a church just beginning to reckon with eco-justice and other signs

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<sup>19</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Journal*, 282.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 736.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 768.

of rapid social change, wary that giving attention to ecological concerns was a fringe issue that should not detract from the “real” work of the gospel.<sup>22</sup>

By the next General Conference session, however, the commentary on environmentalism, though sparse, offered a notable shift in tone. Bishop James K. Mathews of the Washington (DC) Area made the only reference to ecology or environmental issues on the plenary floor at GC 1976. During his devotional address, he gave a moving statement about the sacredness of the earth:

Our forebears knew also that all space is sacred. To measure this reality, they understood that some space had specifically to be designated as sacred space, where the meaning of life is symbolized and empowered. In our society we do not have nearly enough of it; so we continue to pollute and desecrate the planet. Our mothers and fathers in the faith knew that somehow human relations are sacred, and that when this perspective is lost – when, as we say, ‘nothing is sacred’ – then civilization itself is brought to the brink of destruction.<sup>23</sup>

Mathew’s statement strikes a significant contrast with the more ambiguous statements made by Bishops at the 1972 conference. While eco-justice concerns seemed “the current fashion” to Outler just four years earlier, environmentalism was already demonstrating its importance in United Methodist social action.

Despite the emergence of the environmental justice movement and the focus on toxics in the 1980s, it was not until 1996 that another episcopal leader addressed ecological concerns during a sermon at General Conference. At GC 1996 in Denver, Bishop Judy Craig gave the Episcopal Address, saying, “we are deaf if we do not hear

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<sup>22</sup> This type of rhetoric, which suggests that the true work of the church should not be too “political” in nature, represents a school of thought that has persisted throughout the denomination’s history, and connects with the eventual schism that resulted in the creation of the Global Methodist Church. I address the backlash to environmental advocacy (and other social justice movements) later in this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1976), 809.

underneath our shouting [with thanksgiving] the groans and screams of a creation in pain.” She continued, “The Creator weeps over impoverished cities and villages, ravished lands, polluted streams, depleted soil, poisoned air, fractured humanity. The weeping God beckons us to become God’s healing presence in human communities and all created order.”<sup>24</sup> Craig’s address was then employed as a framing statement in a wrap up of the decisions made by the Church and Society Legislative Committee during the session, suggesting the centrality and significance of ecologically connected decisions made by delegates, and showing both how immediately a bishop’s words can inspire action and how committee members at General Conference can strategically employ resources like sermons for action.<sup>25</sup>

A bishop next made a more substantive mention of environmentalism at General Conference in 2012. The long absence without mention of climate change or other ecological concerns by episcopal leaders at General Conference possibly connects to the extreme focus of all General Conference business on topics related to the increasing divide in the church over queer inclusion and other issues separating moderate and progressive United Methodists from “traditionalist” conservatives, a challenge I address later in this chapter. A brief but important ecological emphasis came in as part of the

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<sup>24</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, 1 (The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), <http://www.archive.org/details/journaldenver02unit> Digitized by the Internet Archive, 2009. The legislation summary was written by Lee Ranck and Shanta M. Bryant.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Notably, Bishop Craig was the third woman elected bishop in The UMC’s history. In 1996, she was the first woman selected to deliver the Episcopal address, and was still one of just a small handful of women who had been elected to the episcopal office. Although Bishop Craig did not directly speak about LGBTQ+ inclusion during her address, she joined the next day with a group of fourteen other bishops in calling for an end to the exclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the denomination. "Looking Back and Looking Ahead - A Sankofa Moment," Louisiana Conference of The United Methodist Church, 2024, accessed 27 January 2026, <https://www.la-umc.org/newsdetail/looking-back-and-looking-ahead-a-sankofa-moment-18347593>.

worship service for the Act of Repentance and Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples at the 2012 General Conference.<sup>26</sup> As part of the liturgy, Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster spoke of the role of indigenous communities in helping others to navigate “through our own spiritual emergencies, save our embattled earth, and enable humankind to live as one with creation and all living creatures, including ourselves.”<sup>27</sup> Expanding on Bishop Goodpaster’s acknowledgement of Native Americans’ value and care for creation, Rev. Dr. George Tinker, a Native American from the Osage nation and faculty at UMC-related Iliff School of Theology, gave the sermon, preaching about repentance as “living in harmony and balance” with all our relatives, a group in which Tinker included “buffaloes and squirrels, eagles and sparrows, mountains and rivers – all of [those] are my relatives.”<sup>28</sup>

At the 2020/2024 General Conference, the most substantive comment comes not from episcopal sermons, but from the Young Peoples’ Address. In 2008, the General Conference first introduced a Young People’s address, a designated time to hear from one or more young United Methodists aged 15-28. In 2024, one of the speakers, Alejandra Salemi of the Florida Annual Conference spoke of the challenges facing the denomination today, naming “climate collapse” as one of the causes of displacement of

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<sup>26</sup> The General Conference previously held an Act of Repentance for Racism at the 2000 General Conference.

<sup>27</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate*, vol. Volume 4 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 2164. Unfortunately, despite being a service of repentance, the rhetoric here relies on Native peoples to serve as “saviors” to White communities, with Bishop Goodpaster speaking of “us,” non-Native communities, as the norm.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2161.

mass groups of people.<sup>29</sup> Further, Salemi named climate disaster s one of the sources of her struggle with anxiety, suggesting that climate change (and other global threats) sometimes leave her “frozen in fear” and “hopeless” about the future.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, she said, “I do believe that we can still turn this ship around and prevent worse climate collapse. ... I do believe there’s still time ... I just don’t believe in a God cruel enough to help us imagine a heaven on earth and then not find a pathway to do so.”<sup>31</sup>

Episcopal and denominational leaders have an impact on the theoethical framework of the denomination, and thus on how the denomination pursues and enacts social change. At the same time, Salemi’s speech, which was more direct in confronting social issues general and climate change specifically demonstrates that those less enmeshed in the denominational hierarchy may feel more able to speak clearly and intentionally on pressing issues. Whether from bishops or from young lay people, theological and ethical language at General Conference reflects the matters that are on the minds of the delegations, and provides one small pathway which can inspire action or commitment to theoethical ideals.

### Nonhuman Animals and General Conference Actions

Nonhuman animals have infrequently been the primary subject of proposed legislation, debate, or adopted polity at General Conferences. Over the decades since the

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<sup>29</sup> The United Methodist Church, "Proceedings - Morning 2 Proceedings for April 24," *Daily Christian Advocate* 5, no. 2 (2024): 2, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/gc2020-daily-christian-advocate>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

introduction of the Social Principles, animals have appeared as primary subjects in petitions only occasionally. Animals are more often secondary or tertiary considerations in proposed or adopted legislation, appearing as “background characters” to human activity. Although the Social Principles have included a paragraph on animals since their introduction in 1972, animals have never been a primary focus of General Conference action, and in turn, animals have rarely featured in the work of General Board of Church and Society, or in the work of caucus groups seeking change at General Conference.

The 1972 resolution on “Environmental Stewardship” mentioned earlier is representative of the way animals have typically appeared in UMC legislations, with animals only mentioned in relation to species preservation. The first version of the resolution noted the threat of species loss, and called for biblical and theological reinterpretation to reflect the “seriousness of the present ecological crisis.” In line with the eco-justice focus on ecology and economics, the resolution stressed the outsized impact of ecological devastation on the “poor and powerless.”<sup>32</sup> The Environmental Stewardship resolution has been expanded and revised over the decades, although the way the resolution addresses animals remains consistent. In 2000, for example, a revision to the resolution included a section titled, “Preservation of The Diversity of Life.” The section highlighted the “wondrous diversity” of God’s creation and called for opposition to any “measure which would eliminate diversity in plant and animal varieties, eliminate species, or destroy habitats critical to the survival of endangered species or varieties.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate* (1972), 651-52.

<sup>33</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, Volume 2 (2000), [https://archive.org/stream/journalcleveland02unit/journalcleveland02unit\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/journalcleveland02unit/journalcleveland02unit_djvu.txt), Digitized by the Internet Archive, 2009.

In the 2020/2024 *Book of Resolutions*, an updated resolution titled “Caring for Creation” replaces the Environmental Stewardship resolution, but the lack of attention to animals remains the same. In the “Our Vision” section of the resolution, the text reads, “We are to tend to God’s land and care for all creation’s creatures as faithful trustees with a commitment to preserve its goodness and diversity for future generations.”<sup>34</sup> Animals and land are lumped together, and their “preservation” as species is to benefit future generations of humans.

Bennett Palmer, the clergyperson who had submitted the only legislation focusing directly on animals in 1972, submitted petitions about individual animals for two more quadrennia – in 1976 he submitted a petition, which was rejected, titled “Unnecessary Cruelty to Animals,” marking the only mention of animals in the 1976 Journal. In 1980, he submitted a petition titled “Cruelty to Animals Contrary to Christian Spirit.” His petition was rejected as part of an omnibus motion dealing with a large number of petitions at once.<sup>35</sup> The 1984 and 1988 General Conferences received no legislation related to nonhuman animals. Aside from passing, nonspecific mentions in various petitions, animals were not a topic of conversation, even in legislation *rejected* by delegates.

General Conference 1992 marked the first change to the Social Principles paragraph on animals since 1972. One new sentence was added to the end of the existing two sentences. “We also recognize the necessity of the use of animals in medical and

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<sup>34</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The 2020/2024 Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2020/2024), 79, Resolution 1213.

<sup>35</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1980 Journal*, 828.

cosmetic research; however, we reject the abuse of the same.”<sup>36</sup> This language originated in a petition from Joseph M. Shreve in West Virginia. Delegates added on to this petition by also inserting “animals used in research” to the list of “types” of animals addressed in the paragraph, thus listing this “category” of animals twice in the short paragraph. The added language to acknowledge animals used in research does draw attention to the wellbeing (and exploitation) of individual animals. This amended language, however, was not and has not been accompanied by any proposed resolutions or animal advocacy to enact the language of the principle.

Another petition to amend the paragraph on animals, submitted by a church in San Antonio, Texas, sought to add a clause to the end of the existing second sentence of the paragraph.<sup>37</sup> The existing text read “Furthermore, we encourage the preservation of animal species now threatened with extinction.” The rejected petition would have added “which are considered aesthetically important to humankind’s enjoyment of nature or which are considered to be necessary for the continued existence of human life on earth.”<sup>38</sup> Although little attention had been paid to animals over the last two decades, the clearly anthropocentric language, viewing animals as “useful” only insofar as they were valuable to humans, was not supported by delegates. The amended paragraph on Animal Life thus read:

We support regulations that protect the life and health of animals, including those ensuring the humane treatment of pets and other domestic animals, animals used in research, and the painless slaughtering of meat animals, fish, and fowl.

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<sup>36</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The 1992 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 89 (Paragraph 70C).

<sup>37</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate* (1992), 458.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1021.

Furthermore, we encourage the preservation of animal species now threatened with extinction. We also recognize the necessity of the use of animals in medical and cosmetic research; however, we reject the abuse of the same.”<sup>39</sup>

The 1996 GC acted on one petition directly related to nonhuman animals. One, submitted by GBCS, sought to “shorten and strengthen” the paragraph on Animal Life in the Social Principles. The recommendation changed the language from the 1992 Discipline as follows: “C) [Second Sentence] ~~Furthermore, w~~We encourage the preservation of **all** animal species ~~now~~ **including those** threatened with extinction. ~~We also recognize the necessity of the use of animals in medical and cosmetic research; however, we reject the abuse of the same.~~”<sup>40</sup> The record of proceedings records no rationale for this change to the Animal Life paragraph, and unfortunately, the minutes from the GBCS board meeting where this petition was adopted for submission to General Conference are unavailable. The effect of the change was to mostly undo the language just inserted at the previous General Conference, perhaps deleting the redundancy of the twice-mentioned use of animals in research. The removal of the short-lived language returned the principle to nearly its original form first adopted in 1972.

Shortly after the 1996 GC, GBCS board members had a rare direct conversation about testing products on animals at their Fall 1997 board meeting, as part of a discussion of the board’s investment policy.<sup>41</sup> The Environmental Justice Work Area was tasked

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<sup>39</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1992 Discipline*, Paragraph 70C.

<sup>40</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*. The records of the GBCS board meeting that submitted this petition have been misplaced.

<sup>41</sup> Although the denomination has investment filters in place, GBCS had an investment manager for its own funds, and a set of additional investment filters that were more extensive than those set in place by the *Book of Discipline*.

with adding environmental filters to investment decisions. The board's investment manager noted that while some companies had eliminated testing on animals, like Avon cosmetics, they still bought their materials from companies that *do* test on animals. The manager encouraged board members to "look at those companies which have a high level sensitivity toward change," not necessarily excluding all animal testing in its materials, but moving toward minimizing such testing.<sup>42</sup> This conversation about animal testing, a matter impacting the everyday lives of individual animals, is the only instance of discussion on the topic that I can find in decades of meeting minutes, suggesting an overall low level of importance to the board.

At General Conference 2000, a petition titled "Oppose abuse of animals and support laws and practices that teach awareness of all God's creation" was rejected unanimously. The petition, submitted by Thomas Lee Boles of New Mexico, called for the church to oppose most forms of hunting and using animals in fights.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, a transcript of the debate on Boles' petition in legislative committee is not available, however I speculate that since the global UMC includes many regions, including rural areas in the US, where hunting is a major means of sustenance and livelihood, rejecting hunting practices so broadly was considered untenable.

GBCS submitted a new proposed resolution called "Our Daily Bread" in 2004, focusing on rural communities and agricultural concerns. The petition, which was adopted, included a section on Ecological Damage, which made a rare direct address of

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<sup>42</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Minutes Fall Board Meeting, 1997, 1482-3-6:02 Board Meeting Minutes October 2-5 1997, 111, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

<sup>43</sup> "Text of: 30173-CS-NonDis-O," General Conference 2000, The United Methodist Church, 2000, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://gc2000.org/pets/PET/TEXT/p30173.asp>.

factory farming. The resolution stated, “Factory farms, especially those that produce livestock such as hogs, are poisoning their communities ... The inevitable by-product of huge concentrations of animals is huge concentrations of manure that is store in open lagoons ... [which] becomes a toxic substance.”<sup>44</sup> Though factory farming appears in the legislation, the concern is for the impact of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) on *human* communities. There is no mention of concern for the “livestock” of factory farming, and indeed, use of livestock language linguistically distances humans from acknowledging the animals used in factory farming. Adopted resolutions expire if not explicitly revised or readopted after eight years, and this resolution was not renewed.

The General Church increasingly wrestled with issues of how to balance scientific and technological advances with the care of creation, a struggle reflected in some legislation in the 2000s. GBCS, for example, introduced a resolution called “God’s Creation and Genetically Modified Plants and Animals” in 2008. The resolution addressed harmful exploitation of “God’s soils, landscapes, plants, and animal life merely for their commercial value.” The resolution text noted that North American agricultural practices have resulted in “lost or obliterated strains of corns and apples, reduced the varieties of cattle and sheep to a virtual handful, bred chickens that do not ever get to walk, and turkeys so large they cannot even stand, much less fly.”<sup>45</sup> Although the petition directly comments on the mistreatment of nonhuman animals, the resolution does not meaningfully distinguish between the harm done to plants, animals, or the earth. All are

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<sup>44</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate*, vol. Volume 2, Section 1 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 236.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

listed together. The resolution calls for care and attention regarding genetically modified organisms of both plants and animals. The focus, however, frames animals as food, with concern for animals primarily acknowledged because of the ways that animals, like plants, serve as food for humans. For example, the petition calls out genetically modified traits in the food system that result in “increasing elimination of farm animal diversity.”<sup>46</sup> The concern is for animals as a “crop” that is harvested.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the resolution represents one of the few places where the treatment of nonhuman animals is directly addressed by denominational legislation. Both new resolutions were approved by the plenary without debate on consent calendars.<sup>48</sup>

The 2016 GC again paid attention to the ethical impacts of the rapidly expanding field of genetic science. A GBCS-sponsored resolution revision called “New Developments in Genetic Science” explicitly emphasized the distinctiveness of humanity, saying, “While humans beings share with other species the limitations of finite creatures who owe their existence to God, their special creation ‘in the image of God’ gives them the freedom and authority to exercise stewardship responsibility.”<sup>49</sup> The petition touched on nonhuman animals more directly, with the legislation acknowledging that the practice of altering DNA in “plants and animals, even humans, in order to correct disorders or to

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>47</sup> I discuss the connection between animals and The UMC’s agricultural orientation in the next section.

<sup>48</sup> Legislation Tracker, General Conference 2004, <https://calms2004.umc.org/SearchBySubmitter.asp@mid=2886&Organization=31.html>

<sup>49</sup> The United Methodist Church, *2016 DCA*, Volume 1, 347.

introduce characteristics that are more desirable” was becoming commonplace.<sup>50</sup> The legislation called for “genetically modified crops and genetically engineered or cloned animal products [to] be fully tested as new food stuff, and that they be labeled so that consumers have a choice in which kind of agricultural products to buy.”<sup>51</sup> In this example, the attention to nonhuman animals is for human benefit, to protect human safety from harm through animals used for food.

The 2012 GC adopted a new update to the Animal Life paragraph in the Social Principles. Jaydee Hanson submitted a petition on behalf of Virginia Annual Conference caucus group Caretakers of God’s Creation to amend the paragraph.<sup>52</sup> The resolution, in addition to some minor changes in wording, deleted the sentence reading, “We encourage the preservation of all animal species, including those threatened with extinction,” and added these sentences:

We recognize unmanaged commercial exploitation of wildlife and the destruction of the ecosystems on which they depend threatens the balance of natural systems, compromises biodiversity, reduces resilience and threatens ecosystem services. We encourage commitment to effective implementation of national and international regulations and guidelines for the conservation of all animal species with particular support to safeguard those threatened with extinction.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>52</sup> Though Caretakers of God’s Creation is an Annual Conference-level ministry, the group has had a strong activist presence in the denomination, supporting the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement, and petitioning General Conference in 2020/2024 to establish Caretakers of God’s Creation Coordinator positions in every Annual Conference. Of my interview subjects, both Jaydee Hanson and Pat Watkins have been part of this group, although our conversations mostly focused on other areas of their advocacy. See the Caretakers website, <https://umcreationjustice.org/caretakers-of-gods-creation-home/>, for more information.

<sup>53</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate*, vol. Volume 2 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 187.

The Caretakers group felt that the existing animal life statement focuses too much on domesticated animals and animals used in research and that the existing language specified these two categories of animals along with pets as animal groups of particular concern. Thus, the caucus sought to balance this focus with more emphasis on the threat to species of animals through destructive human activity.<sup>54</sup> The Church and Society legislative committee recommended adopting the petition with a few slight changes, and the revised petition passed the plenary without requiring discussion.<sup>55</sup>

### Animals and LGBTQ+ Inclusion at General Conference

Among the infrequent mentions of nonhuman animals on the plenary floor at General Conference, a problematic subset includes times that delegates compared queer people to animals to argue against granting their full rights and inclusion in the denomination. In 2008, for example, a Black delegate, Timothy C. Thompson Sr. of Mississippi, spoke of the animalizing that enslaved African peoples experienced when forcibly brought to the United States, calling enslavement a misinterpretation of scripture. “We were told by scripture that we weren’t human, that we were less than human, and that we were derived from animals,” he said. “That was not the interpretation of scripture but the misinterpretation of scripture.” He continued, though, to argue unlike racist biblical *misinterpretations*, the “incompatibility of homosexuality with Christian teaching” is “based upon the Word of God ... whether I like it or whether I don’t like it,”

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>55</sup> 2012 Legislation Tracking, <https://calms2012.umc.org/Menu.aspx?type=Calendar&mode=Single&number=56>. Accessed 2 October 2024.

with no interpretive ambiguity<sup>56</sup> The employment of animal language for use in debates about human sexuality relies on problematic dualisms that have equated Black people and other racial minority groups with animals, employing the “master model” logic of domination I outlined in the Introduction, drawn from the work of ecofeminist Val Plumwood. Thompson Sr. acknowledges the misinterpretation that represented Black people as less than human, while still insisting there is no possible interpretation of scripture that could result in inclusion of multiple sexual orientations.

Reacting to harmful instances of animalizing language about LGBTQ+ persons in comments by delegates at previous General Conferences on the plenary floor, in legislative committees, and in structured small group conversations, the 2016 Delegate Handbook contained guidelines for “Sensitivity on Holding Conversations Around Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” One guideline told delegates, “Comparing LGBTQ marriages, covenants, and relationships to bestiality and spouses/partners to animals is harmful and unacceptable.”<sup>57</sup> The directive again reveals the tendency of conflating animality with gender and sexuality minority groups, with the result of othering and belittling both humans and nonhumans.

As I stated in the introduction, The UMC has a long history of claiming liberal values of inclusion, but failing to live up to those claims. The notable lack of conversation during General Conference plenaries through the years regarding creation, the environment, ecology, or climate change, much less any conversation regarding

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<sup>56</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate*, vol. Volume 4 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 2600.

<sup>57</sup> The United Methodist Church, *2016 DCA*, Volume 1, 39.

nonhuman animals, can be attributed in part to the enormous amount of time spent during plenaries debating LGBTQ+ inclusion. Increasingly through the quadrennia, nearly every aspect of plenary debate related in some way to the deep theological and ethical denominational divide over human sexuality, directly or indirectly. Delegates had little agenda space left for other business, running out time to act on all legislation.<sup>58</sup> LGBTQ+ persons have been excluded from ordination, from marriage, and from full participation in the life of the denomination from 1972 until the 2020/2024 General Conference, and though the most hurtful language has been removed from the *Discipline*, much work remains toward building a truly just praxis around gender and sexuality for The UMC. Reconsidering how we understand the categories of “human,” “animal,” and “Other” are an important part of this work, as the instances of othering through animalization I have described so clearly and painfully demonstrate. Ecofeminist theory and theology works to dismantle such harmful dualisms, pointing out how racialization and animalization of humans is part of systemic oppression that values dominant groups at the expense of the marginalized. I discuss approaches to deconstructing this degrading othering in Chapter 5.

### The Endangered Species Act

As I have shown, The UMC has engaged in very little advocacy related directly to nonhuman animals. There is one notable exception to this inattention, however: the denomination has supported the U.S. federal government’s Endangered Species Act, first

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<sup>58</sup> The United Methodist Church, *2012 DCA*, Volume 4, 2814.

introduced in 1973, since its inception. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) enacts protections for threatened and endangered species of animals through avenues such as seeking species recovery and rehabilitation, and prohibiting certain activities in areas in the habitats of endangered animals.<sup>59</sup> Through the decades since the ESA was first passed by Congress, The UMC has advocated for its enforcement and expansion, and against attempts to weaken the legislation. In the 1980s, for example, GBCS sent a letter to Secretary of the Interior James Watt, a cabinet member of the Reagan Administration who was known for his anti-environmentalism. The board criticized a number of Watt's policies, including actions related to National Parks, oil development on federal lands, energy policy, and mineral exploration in designated "wilderness" lands. The letter also chastised Watt for "[suspending] the listing of species under the Endangered Species Act," as well as rolling back protections for marine mammals and migrating caribou.<sup>60</sup>

Artaza-Regan mentioned advocating for the Endangered Species Act as the only animals-focused legislative advocacy she remembered during her time at GBCS in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>61</sup> She reported that GBCS and ecumenical partners used the Noah's Ark narrative from Genesis as the primary biblical connection to advocate for the ESA.<sup>62</sup> She noted, however, that even though ESA advocacy ostensibly centered nonhuman

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<sup>59</sup> "Endangered Species Act," 2026, accessed 3 January 2026, <https://www.fws.gov/law/endangered-species-act>.

<sup>60</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Minutes, 1981, 1480-1-2:11 Annual Meeting Minutes, October 7-10, 1981, Appendix XII, 48, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

<sup>61</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

<sup>62</sup> Artaza-Regan refers to a 1996 movement led by the Evangelical Environmental Network and joined by the NRPE and its constituent members to counter the 104<sup>th</sup> US Congress's attempts to weaken the Endangered Species Act. See Laurel Kearns, "Noah's Ark Goes to Washington: A Profile of Evangelical Environmentalism," *Social Compass* 44, no. 3 (1997).

animals, the theoretical foundation also included emphasis on the *human* benefits of the ESA, such as the economic benefits humans get from species diversity. Artaza-Regan argued that several of GBCS's eco-justice initiatives in fact only served to protect animals in order for them to continue to be available for human usage.

While actions like the letter to Watts and the Noah's Ark campaign were more proactive, eventually ESA-related advocacy became more passive. A summary of GBCS actions in 1995 briefly mentioned the Endangered Species Act, noting that Environmental Justice staff "wrote a backgrounder" about the ESA for an upcoming interfaith workshop that would include mention of the legislation.<sup>63</sup> This action was the only listed action related to the ESA in the report for the quadrennium. In the late 1990s, GBCS endorsed the work of the Endangered Species Coalition, an organization aimed at supporting the Endangered Natural Heritage Act, legislation meant to strengthen the ESA through improved and enduring protection of animal species.<sup>64</sup> The denomination thus supported the ideals of the ESA, but often only lent support to others more directly engaged in advocacy.

The frequently hands-off approach to support of the ESA persisted into the early 2000s. Heading into General Conference 2004, the Environmental Justice Work Area

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<sup>63</sup> This backgrounder connected with the Noah's Ark initiative mentioned by Artaza-Regan and described above. General Board of Church and Society, Annual Meeting Agenda Book March 2-5 1995, 1995, 1435-2-3:07 Annual Meeting Agenda book Mark 2-5 1995, 69, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

<sup>64</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Minutes Spring Board Meeting, 1997, 1482-3-5:08 Board Meeting Minutes, March 6-9, 1997, 126, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC. The Endangered Species Coalition is "a national network of conservation, scientific, education, religious, sporting, outdoor recreation, business and community organizations – and hundreds of thousands of individual activists and supporters – all dedicated to protecting our nation's disappearing wildlife and last remaining wild places." "Endangered Species Coalition," 2026, accessed 3 January, <https://www.endangered.org/mission/>.

reported on its progress on the goals of the past quadrennium. Just one quadrennial priority mentioned nonhuman animals - working for the preservation of endangered plant and animal species. Again, no distinction is made in the objectives and goals between plants and animals. Recorded progress towards the goal of protecting endangered species included only one action: “Signed on to letters in opposition to legislation that would weaken the Endangered Species Act.”<sup>65</sup> GBCS did not initiate any of its own actions to meet their goal, which, along with the fact that signing on to letters was the single action related to species protection, suggests that animals, even as species, were an extremely low priority for GBCS.

The UMC’s way of supporting the Endangered Species Act over the decades is indicative of the denomination’s attitude toward nonhuman animals. Animals are valued as a part of creation, but as species, rather than as individual creatures. Animals are part of ecosystems that need protecting, and part of the biodiversity that the church values, but consideration for animals as unique beings deserving of moral worth deserving of attention is absent. Even advocacy related to support of the ESA waned over time, suggesting that as denominational resources shrank (which I discuss below), work on the ESA was near the bottom of the list of priorities, more easily set to the side than other eco-justice concerns.

Vignette: Jeanie Ree Moore

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<sup>65</sup> General Board of Church and Society, *Agenda for the Fall Board Meeting September 11-14, 2003* (Washington, DC, 2003), 204.

Despite most animal-related advocacy in The UMC focusing on animal *species*, I offer at least one example of advocacy focused on valuing each animal life. During my interview with John Hill, former Interim General Secretary and GBCS, and manager of the board's environmental advocacy portfolio, Hill shared that he primarily saw advocacy connected to animals as an individual response that might emerge tangentially through a connection to climate justice work. "As we [at GBCS] encourage personal, social and civic holiness, among the personal aspects, one of the things they can do to lower their carbon footprint is eating a more plant-based diet as they are able. So that's always been an individual conversation." Likewise, he mentioned that caring for nonhuman animals – and thus choosing a vegetarian or vegan diet – is often mentioned by individual grassroots organizers as part of their motivation for their environmentalism, which then is added to the "collective conversation" during trainings – but is rarely reflected in policy work.

Nonetheless, individuals committed to animal advocacy can – and have sometimes – pushed for denominational action. Jeania Ree Moore, an ordained clergyperson in The UMC, worked at GBCS from 2016-2020 as the Director of Civil and Human Rights. Although Moore's portfolio did not directly include eco-justice concerns as part of her work, Moore used her role as a staff person to encourage GBCS to begin addressing the topic of care for nonhuman animals in more meaningful ways. In an interview with Moore, she reported that she had become a vegetarian, then a vegan during her time working at GBCS. "It was out of my own consciousness raising experiences in my life related to things I was reading, thinking about, and people I was

meeting [who were vegetarian or vegan].”<sup>66</sup> Although Moore is no longer a vegan, it was “a really important experience and period in my life,” a “spiritual experience.”

Moore began to raise the issue of care for nonhuman animals after talking to co-workers and noticing a lack of attention to animals at the agency. “Working at a place that works on justice and its permutations, on lived faith practice, [and] on policies that create a more just and ethical world” made her want to advocate for an alignment between her faith and contemporary food industry practices, like farmed animal welfare. As she became more interested in “articulating animal ethics in a Christian framework,” she eventually joined the Board of Directors for CreatureKind.

In her new role at CreatureKind, she began asking at GBCS was there was “any space” for the inclusion of animal ethics ideals within the Wesleyan/Methodist public “speech acts” – particularly in documents like the Social Principles or *The Book of Resolutions*. Her questions coincided with the work of the Revised Social Principles Task Force, which eventually presented its work to the 2020/2024 General Conference, but began its work after being created by the 2012 GC. Moore approached John Hill, then serving as Assistant General Secretary for Advocacy and Organizing, with her interest. Hill responded that while he felt animal ethics were “in line” with the work of the board, that advocacy for nonhuman animals was low in priority among all the issues GBCS sought to advocate for or include in the list of topics to be considered for the Social Principles revisions. Moore felt Hill’s response was “sympathetic,” but that it reflected the denomination’s anthropocentrism as well. Since Moore’s own portfolio was focused

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<sup>66</sup> Jeania Ree Moore, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, 22 September, 2024.

on human civil rights, she did not feel she could contest – she, too, spent most of her time on “pressing” human-centric work.

Moore then sought other ways to support animal ethics in her work, looking for ways that environmental concerns and human crises overlap. For example, she partnered with an organization that sought protections for migrating butterflies, since the organization was concerned that the federal government’s proposal to build a more complete border wall between Mexico and the United States would result in damaging the butterflies. This group’s concerns coincided with Moore’s work on advocacy for immigrants at the border, and thus advocacy for both human migrants and non-human migrants aligned with GBCS’s priorities. “Leaning into [advocacy actions] like that felt good and right in terms of the deeper ethical issues that underly creation,” Moore said. “We actually are one world together.” Finding “political moments” where that oneness of creation could rise to the surface, and where human and animal concerns were not pitted against each other – Moore found these moments in her work compelling. She eventually wrote a column for *Sojourners* magazine, reflecting on her experiences as a Black woman thinking about the intersections of animal justice, human justice, and race.<sup>67</sup> Many, Moore said, have worried that the “ethical concerns of non-human animals often come at the expense of Black people.” She sought to communicate that human and animal concerns were not in competition at all, if one can view the issues through the right lens.

Moore’s activism, emerging from the kind of personal holiness practices Hill references above, expanded through her efforts to impact the larger context of the

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<sup>67</sup> Jeania Ree Moore, "When Racism Pits Animal Justice Against Black Humanity," *Sojourners*, 2019, <https://sojo.net/magazine/septemberoctober-2019/when-racism-pits-animal-justice-against-black-humanity>.

agency's work. Her efforts show both the influence an individual can have in advocating for change, *and* the limitations and obstacles in the pathway of change, as institutional hierarchies make transformation difficult. In *Longing for Running Water*, ecofeminist philosopher Ivone Gebara notes argues that women often are "present but unacknowledged" in traditional epistemologies, "not regarded as constitutive elements in the process of making our knowing explicit."<sup>68</sup> Moore's experience seeking change for animals in The UMC shows an example of the institutional framework working to determine what priorities and knowledge were valuable within the denomination.

#### The UMC, Agriculture, and Animals

Another angle of The UMC's relationship to nonhuman animals comes through examining the denomination's emphasis on rural life issues, agricultural concerns, and farmer justice. Hill, Artaza-Regan, and Hanson all mentioned the importance of agricultural concerns both in the work of GBCS and in the wider denomination. Artaza-Regan shared that during the early eco-justice work of GBCS, many of the board members were farmers, and for at least two quadrennia, in fact, the chair of GBCS's Environmental Justice Work Area *was* a farmer. The cares and concerns of farmworkers, then, were particularly reflected in the work of the board. This focus on farmworkers, however, was centered on the farmers themselves, and the land, but not specifically on the well-being of farmed animals. Artaza-Regan emphasized that although GBCS spent

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<sup>68</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 22.

considerable time on farm bill legislation, advocacy work did not address farming *practices*. “We only see [this absence] of attention looking back,” she noted.<sup>69</sup>

Hanson came to his position at GBCS having already done some advocacy both with farmworkers and resource management, experiences that served him well in a denomination with strong agricultural membership. In response to a question about the presence or absence of nonhuman animals in eco-justice conversations in The UMC, Hanson reflected on his own experiences working on a small dairy farm in college. Those small farms “are not around anymore” he said. Hanson suggested that increasingly, people have no connections with animals outside of their family pets. “How can [people] know what animals experience if they don’t see it?” Hanson suggested that given the substantial number of UMC clergy who serve in rural areas, denomination members should be better equipped to think about nonhuman animals, to have relationships with farmers, and to think theologically about the place of animals in creation. However, “people don’t want to talk to farmers,” he lamented. The denomination’s disconnect in its legislative emphases from its own rural and agricultural roots could be contributing to The UMC’s lack of action on animal welfare, he suggested.

Despite Hanson’s lament, the denomination has certainly passed a great deal of legislation focused on agricultural concerns. The 1984 GC, for example, mandated a series of hearings across the denomination on agricultural issues facing constituents. Following these “grassroots level” hearings, GBCS submitted to the 1988 GC an updated and expanded resolution titled “U.S. Agriculture and Rural Communities in Crisis,”

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<sup>69</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

which included a theological statement focusing on land, toxic wastes, water pollution, and a section on the farming crisis.<sup>70</sup>

Agricultural legislation in The UMC also championed the rights of Black farmers, an effort supported by the Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) caucus group. In the same year the denomination received the report of the grassroots agricultural listening sessions (1988), BMCR submitted a petition addressing “Black-owned farmland.” Their petition, recommended by the Church and Society legislative committee, focused on “the plight of Black farmers and the need for financial, technical, and management assistance to help stop the decline of Black-owned farmland.”<sup>71</sup>

Hill spoke of GBCS’s advocacy related to the U.S. Farm Bill over the years as a potential place UMC advocacy includes concern for nonhuman animals.<sup>72</sup> He acknowledged, however, the emphasis on both GBCS’s advocacy and the Farm Bill itself has always been on human dairy and poultry workers, rather than the animals with whom humans work. Although agricultural legislation in The UMC has been consistently present, rarely does the legislation address nonhuman animals for their own sake, even when such connections would make sense. For example, when GBCS signed on to a national campaign to support “sustainable agriculture,” which recommended extensive reforms related to farming and farming practices, the campaign focused on safety of the US food supply and reduction of pesticides, but did not mention animal labor or animal

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<sup>70</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Daily Christian Advocate* (1988), D-1-52-55; *ibid.*, F-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 392.

<sup>72</sup> Hill, interview. The Farm Bill is a legislation package passed approximately every five years by Congress that impacts how food is grown, what food is grown, crop insurance, food access, farmer training, and other related topics.

well-being.<sup>73</sup> Mention of animals in General Conference agricultural legislation have been brief: a petition to the 1996 GC, for example, on US Agriculture and Rural Communities in Crisis included the statement, “The genetic engineering of plants and animals and the patenting of genes, plants, and animals raise major theological and ethical concerns.”<sup>74</sup> As mentioned elsewhere, animals are just one category in a list of non-human creation, apparently no different than plants in their moral value. The UMC’s emphasis on agricultural concerns could be a potential site of connection for considering protections for animals as laborers in the agricultural system, and for heightening awareness of the contributions of animals to human well-being, and therefore for considering the well-being of animals in turn.<sup>75</sup> Instead, the denomination’s agricultural focus seems only to increase the human-centered focus of advocacy work, even when animals are deeply involved in the issues at hand.

### Toxics, Race, and Environmental Justice

As I described in Chapter 1, The UMC (along with several other mainline Protestant denominations) has made a significant commitment to racial justice as a core component of their environmental work. In the early 1980s, The UMC began increasing its focus on toxic wastes and racial justice, in conjunction with the work of the Eco-

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<sup>73</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Annual Meeting Agenda Book October 6-9, 1994, 1994, 1435-2-3:05 Annual Meeting Agenda Books October 6-9, 1994, 71-82, United Methodist Archives, Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

<sup>74</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*.

<sup>75</sup> I consider Donna Haraway’s ecofeminist reflections on animal labor in Chapter 5.

justice Working Group. Chapter 1 traced some of the denomination's work on toxics, and here I detail some legislative shifts and agency work related to the growing commitment to address environmental racism. By 1982, the Department of Environmental Justice and Survival (an early name for GBCS's Environmental Justice Work Area) was getting deeply involved in addressing toxic pollution, with staff assigned to cultivating a network of relationships with other groups working on "toxic chemicals and problems related to their use and disposal."<sup>76</sup> By 1984, the General Conference adopted new language into the Social Principles reflecting this intensified focus in environmentalism. Delegates voted to add a sentence to the paragraph in the Social Principles on "Water, Air, Soil, Minerals, and Plants" again. In 1980, the opening sentence read, "We support and encourage social policies designed to rejuvenate polluted water, air, and soil, as well as those that would prevent further desecration of these natural elements."<sup>77</sup> In 1984, the General Conference amended the opening of the paragraph to read, "We support and encourage social policies that serve to reduce and control the creation of industrial by-products and waste; facilitate the safe processing and disposal of toxic and nuclear waste; and enhance the rejuvenation of polluted air, water, and soil."<sup>78</sup> The language is more specific and the changes move the language about toxic wastes to a more immediate position within the overall paragraph.

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<sup>76</sup> General Board of Church and Society, Report to the Board of Church and Society, 1982, 1480-1-3:04 Annual Meeting Minutes, October 7-10, 1982, 5, United Methodist Archives in Madison, NJ, Washington, DC.

<sup>77</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The 1980 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), 87 (Paragraph 70A).

<sup>78</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1984 Discipline*, 87 (Paragraph 70A).

At the 1988 GC, advocacy on toxics and environmental racism was even more central to delegates' work. Several individuals and groups, including George McClain, Executive Secretary of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA), submitted a petition titled "Indoor Air Pollution," and MFSA also submitted a petition titled "Toxic Waste and Race."<sup>79</sup> Approved by the legislative committee, "Toxic Waste and Race" called for "study and action on the pattern of locating hazardous waste facilities in areas inhabited by ethnic minority populations."<sup>80</sup> Meeting just one year after the landmark "Toxic Wastes and Race" report from the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice," this petition explicitly references the UCC report, pledges a commitment to understanding and eliminating racism, calls on GBCS and GBGM to undertake "appropriate initiatives of study and action," and urges the General Commission on Religion and Race to "monitor the response of the agencies and the church at large to this urgent concern."<sup>81</sup> Presenting the legislation to the body, Kay Dillard of Northern Illinois spoke about environmental racism, offering to distribute copies of the UCC's report. She called the "Toxic Waste" resolution "one of the most urgent problems," noting the UMC's historic concern both for eliminating racism and protecting God's creation.

One delegate, Bill Hataway of Texas, spoke against the resolution, arguing that race should not be a factor of particular concern related to toxic waste:

Toxic waste is a problem for everybody, it's on the just and the unjust. Racial people, ethnic people have problems with it, we're all going to have problems with it. It's not going to just hurt the ethnics, it's going to hurt everybody in the

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<sup>79</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1988 DCA*, 35. McClain is one of my interview subjects, and I share his insights later in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

United States. We need to look at it in that way. We ought not to just point out that it's going to hurt the Blacks, we don't want to hurt the Blacks, we don't want to hurt anybody, but I think that if anything we would either vote against this or make an amendment to take the race out of it and just investigate toxic waste.<sup>82</sup>

Without further debate, the resolution passed by a vote of 558-293.<sup>83</sup> This resolution, acknowledging the existence and problem of environmental racism, was the most divided vote of any ecologically themed legislation addressed to this point in time. Building on the 1984 legislation, the Toxic Waste and Race resolution also signifies a denominational commitment to prioritizing a fight against the disparate ways environmental harm impacts minoritized communities.

GBCS staff also participated on the advisory board of the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, and sponsored training sessions on toxics for local communities, particularly “ethnic and third world communities.”<sup>84</sup> At General Conference 1992, GBCS submitted or endorsed a number of related resolutions, including “Pollution in Metropolitan Areas,” “A Sustainable Society for Pollution,” “Environmental Justice for a Sustainable Future,” and an updated resolution on “Environmental Racism.”<sup>85</sup> The “Environmental Racism” resolution was unanimously supported by the Church and Society legislative committee, and *not* debated on the plenary floor, perhaps denoting an increased acceptance of the importance of

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 712.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> I also discuss the Summit and its role in the environmental justice movement in Chapter 1 .

<sup>85</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1992 DCA*, 128-32.

acknowledging and addressing environmental racism, a marked shift from the 1988 General Conference.<sup>86</sup>

GBCS leaders Hanson and Artaza-Regan were both active with the agency during the early years of the environmental justice movement and the ambitious work on toxic wastes and race. When I asked Artaza-Regan about The UMC’s work addressing nonhuman animals, she linked the lack of focus on nonhuman animals to GBCS’s explicit support of the environmental justice movement. She recalled initial efforts in the late 1980s to begin addressing climate change, remembering a video circulating in faith communities that asked, “Can polar bears tread water?”<sup>87</sup> The video, she said, evoked some “visceral” responses. Many activists who had committed to work on toxics felt the video was distracting. “Who cares if [polar bears can swim] or not?” The video and the issue of climate change was rejected by some Black activists in the environmental justice movement as a “White environmental issue” while “*our* lives are being destroyed.” Artaza-Regan and other eco-justice partners worked to weave together the idea that the “polar bear crisis and your community crisis – these are the *same* forces.” Both areas of work could receive attention.<sup>88</sup>

Hanson, meanwhile, described Black environmental justice leaders as some of first to “get” the need for aggressive and ambitious work on climate change. Hanson tried throughout his years at GBCS, he said, to encourage the participation of Black

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 132, 527. Statements on environmental racism have remained part of the *Book of Resolutions* in some form since its initial adoption.

<sup>87</sup> The video mentioned is likely the 1989 documentary titled “Can Polar Bears Tread Water?” produced by Central Independent Television in association with Television for the Environment and the Better World Society.

<sup>88</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

community leaders and “grassroots” activists in UMC and EJWP environmental work, alongside the usual church “bureaucrats,” to achieve change on environmental issues.<sup>89</sup> Hanson emphasized how essential the work of racial justice is to the eco-justice movement.<sup>90</sup> For Hanson, the work of eco-justice – with an emphasis on all created beings, human and otherwise - and the work of racial justice are deeply intertwined. Environmental racism is “not only pollution that [BIPOC] communities face, but how they are viewed. What *allows* them to be dumped on.” He longs for people to “[understand] the extent to which humans are also part of God’s creation. It’s a heresy,” he said, that people believe humans are separate from the rest of creation. “We are *all* creatures, and our creature-ness is an important part that leads to looking at each other as creatures of God. When we’re racist, we’re failing at God’s vision of us as creatures.”

### Backlash: Anti-Environmental Efforts

As with any social issues, environmental activism has never had *unanimous* support in The UMC, but at GC 2000, a notable shift occurred, marking the first targeted *anti*-environmental petitions, reflective of a growing movement by political conservatives to push back against momentum in green movements across the country.<sup>91</sup> Mark Tooley, a lay member from Virginia and then director of UM Action, an arm of the conservative

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<sup>89</sup> Hanson, interview.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> See one exploration of this growing backlash in Andrew Rowell, *Green Backlash: Global Subversion of the Environmental Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD),<sup>92</sup> submitted a petition titled, “Christian environmentalism doesn’t venerate earth but worships its Creator.” The petition asked the General Conference to “reject pantheism, panentheism, or any other effort to confuse the boundaries between God and His creation. Christian environmentalism does not venerate the earth but worships its Creator. We are called to be good and creative stewards of natural resources with which God has blessed us that we might employ them for His glory.”<sup>93</sup> A record of deliberations around this petition is not available, but the legislative committee moved nonconcurrency with the petition, and the plenary overwhelmingly agreed, rejecting the petition.<sup>94</sup> Tooley’s petition is indicative of the theological skepticism about the merits of environmentalism present in The UMC from its beginnings, as I recounted above through the words of some episcopal and denominational leaders.<sup>95</sup> His petition also represents a genre of conservative activism that champions “wise use” environmental policies. Climate change skeptics and climate denier groups like the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation (formed in 2005) adopt stewardship language and the concept of “wise use” of the “gifts” of creation God has given humanity to justify extractive practices.<sup>96</sup> Although the Cornwall Alliance

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<sup>92</sup> Tooley is now the president of the IRD. For a longer exploration of the work of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and Tooley’s Role, Steven M. Tipton’s chapter “From Cold War to Culture Wars The Evolution of the IRD” is helpful. Tipton, *Public Pulpits*.

<sup>93</sup> "Text of: 31625-FO-64-D," General Conference 2000, 2000, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://gc2000.org/pets/PET/TEXT/p31625.asp>.

<sup>94</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*.

<sup>95</sup> Kearns mentions pantheism or “worshiping the creation” as an ongoing fear of conservative Christianity, which she connects with the ancient Israelite rejection of what were viewed as “pagan nature-worshipping” neighboring nations. Kearns, "The Context of Eco-theology," 477-78.

<sup>96</sup> For an exploration of the Cornwall Alliance and other anti-environmental organizations, see Renan William dos Santos and Laurel D. Kearns, "Trojan Horses Facing the Mirror: A Comparison

and similar groups like the IRD use stewardship language, their approach more accurately fits within a dominion and domination perspective that sees little use for creation outside of its usefulness for humans.<sup>97</sup> Tooley continued submitting anti-environmental petitions through the next several General Conferences, such as a 2016 petition seeking to delete references to climate change and its impact on natural disasters and poverty.<sup>98</sup> Though Tooley's proposals were typically rejected, fighting back against anti-environmental efforts within the denomination took time and energy, straining already stretched-thin resources for eco-justice work, a stress on eco-justice work to which I now turn.

#### Supporting the Eco-Justice Movement: Staffing and Financial Support

One theme that surfaced consistently in the interviews I conducted – whether with denominational staffers or caucus group leaders – was thinking about how to resource environmental activism in The UMC in a sustainable way. At times in The UMC's history, the denomination boasted a more robust financial and staffing commitment to eco-justice concerns than other mainline Protestant denominations, which allowed The UMC to take a leading role in the eco-justice movement. In more recent years, dedicated staffing and financial support for general boards and agencies and for ecumenical

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between Religious Anti-Environmental Movement Organizations in the US and Brazil," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 18, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.24014>.

<sup>97</sup> Rebecca Kneale Gould and Laurel Kearns, "The Tent of Abraham: The Emerging Landscape of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ecological Traditions," *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method Articles* (2023), <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350930896.017>.

<sup>98</sup> The United Methodist Church, *2016 DCA*, Volume 1, 191-92.

mainline Protestant agencies has declined steeply, reflecting the declining incomes for shrinking denominations. Although ideological commitment for eco-justice concerns remains strong in both official and caucus groups of The UMC, fewer dedicated staff and fewer dollars of direct support for environmental work limits how much the denomination can prioritize creation justice in its social justice portfolio. Both Hanson and Artaza-Regan mentioned The UMC's dedication to the eco-justice movement through staff and financial resources. Artaza-Regan underlined the weight The UMC gave to the environmental movement in the 1980s and 1990s, when the denomination was the only one who had full-time staff focused on ecological issues. She remembered that other denominations had multi-purpose staff who focused on eco-justice work half-time at most. Since the UMC had full-time staff devoted to environmental work, she recalled, The UMC took the lead in the Washington advocacy staff community.<sup>99</sup>

By the time John Hill began working at GBCS though, things were different. Hill felt that by the time he began working at GBCS, staffing for environmental issues felt sparse. Only in 2002, his first year at GBCS, was his work entirely dedicated to environmentalism. After that, he had to split his time among an expanding workload. "My ability to do the program work has been constrained," he reported.<sup>100</sup> Even when the agency expanded its staff through hiring of multiple grassroots organizers in the 2012-2016 quadrennium, GBCS did not assign any of the new organizers to focus on eco-justice work. When I interviewed Hill, he was still serving as Interim General Secretary. Aside from his continued focus on environmental concerns, now one area of many

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<sup>99</sup> Artaza-Regan, interview.

<sup>100</sup> Hill, interview.

assigned to his care, GBCS had two staff working on eco-justice connected issues. However, environmental advocacy was a secondary emphasis at best for both.

In an interview with Jessica M. Smith, Senior Executive Director of Research, Planning, and Spiritual Formation at GBCS, she affirmed Hill's assessment.<sup>101</sup> She argues that an increasingly limited budget for the whole General Church - which has resulted in shrinking board and agency staff and boards of directors - shapes UM polity. One of the approaches the denomination takes in revising polity is considering "what are the issues that have the most global impact in the connection." Thus, she concluded, "climate change becomes a priority" rather than environmental concerns that might be narrower in scope. For more specific ecological concerns, the strategy is to resource people at the local level who are activists on a specific topic through micro-grant programs, a strategy, as discussed above, that GBCS took through its grassroots initiative.

Financial constraints impacted GBCS's ecumenical partners in eco-justice work as well, leading to a substantial reshaping of the NCC's Eco-justice Working Group. Although Avery Lamb started at Creation Justice Ministries (CJM) well after it separated from the National Council of Churches, he was familiar with CJM's history, and he addressed the financial impact of the shift in detail. The EJWG was a program of the National Council of Churches, funded by the NCC's budget and the contributions of member denominations. Creation Justice Ministries, however, is funded primarily by grant money. This model of financial support, Lamb said, means that CJM addresses issues strategically based on the priorities of their financial supporters. When they were

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<sup>101</sup> Jessica M. Smith, interview by Beth Quick, Zoom, May 13, 2024.

part of the NCC, the EJWG “had more opportunity to speak prophetically.” Now, CJM must be savvier, always asking the question: “Can we get funding for it?”<sup>102</sup>

Carmichael offered an example supporting Lamb’s perspective. She recounted CreatureKind’s efforts to partner with denominational leadership, the same initiative I previously described as a part of Jeania Ree Moore’s efforts to help GBCS think about nonhuman animals. These conversations between denominational personnel and CreatureKind were co-sponsored by Creation Justice Ministries and the NRPE. Directed by CreatureKind, CJM and NRPE leadership conducted interviews with church agency staff persons, held a retreat, and conducted webinars, all aimed at meeting CreatureKind’s goal of increasing denomination’s interest and advocacy on behalf of farmed animals. She remembered that CreatureKind co-founder David Clough was “keen to see if there was a resonance” to support farmed animal rights in mainline denominations. Carmichael, though, did not seem optimistic. “There were lots of staff involved,” Carmichael recalled, “but not a lot of funding for it. How do you motivate and engage people?” she asked. Carmichael doubted there would be prolonged or deep support of CreatureKind’s work at the denominational level.

Fluctuating financial support for environmental advocacy serves as a barrier to the work of eco-justice in multiple ways, and it is a barrier to dynamic social visioning for the future. As The UMC continues to face financial challenges in the wake of the recent departure of about one third of the membership to the new Global Methodist Church, these financial challenges are likely to increase. With inconsistent financial resources, staffing is also inconsistent, leaving fewer and fewer people to care for a widening

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<sup>102</sup> Lamb, interview.

portfolio of ecological concerns. Relationships between eco-justice organizations also suffer, since depending on ongoing partnerships are impacted by staff availability and resources each group brings to joint projects. Further, financial precarity even leads to outside groups influencing the agenda of organizations like Creation Justice Ministries, meaning the organization is no longer the primary decision-maker on what legislative issues are most urgent.<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, given the declining financial assets of most mainline Protestant denominations, tough choices about how to deploy limited staff and resources will likely only become more common. Despite the challenges, dedicated activists continue to seek creative ways to make an impact, collaborating, sharing resources, and making strategic decisions about where their time can make the most difference.

#### Change Agents: Partnerships, Caucuses, and Individual Activists

As I have mentioned, the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) works to carrying out the values of The UMC's Social Principles through advocacy work, including lobbying for denominational stances in various levels of government and seeking to influence annual conferences and local churches to embrace social justice work. As is clear from its role in ecumenical organizations like the Eco-Justice Working Group, GBCS accomplishes its work through a variety of partnerships with various

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<sup>103</sup> Organizational precarity is also sometimes dependent on changes in federal funding. In 2025, for example, faith-based environmental group Interfaith Power and Light shuttered its national offices in part because of significant funding losses due to cuts directed by the Trump administration. Broian Roewe, "Interfaith Climate Group Shuts National Office Amid Trump Environmental Attacks," *National Catholic Reporter* 2025, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/interfaith-climate-group-shuts-national-office-amid-trump-environmental-attacks>.

organizations. I asked John Hill to describe who has influence over GBCS’s work; who has an impact on the direction GBCS takes in its legislative work? “It has always been a conversation,” Hill responded, and the best work is “arrived at after conversation with others – in the grassroots, and with ecumenical and interfaith partners ... Our work is done in coalition with other partners. Those relationships with other partners inform what our staff might focus on” in conversation with staff and board leadership. “All of that is in alignment with and flows out of the official teachings of the church” adopted at GC.<sup>104</sup> Jessica Smith expanded on the importance and values of GBCS’s collaborative approach. As GBCS considers how to achieve legislative goals, she explained, the agency works with ecumenical partners to accomplish its work.<sup>105</sup> Smith asked, “How do we understand power in these arenas? Who is in which group and who is able to push issues [for The UMC]?” For example, she contrasted the “Earth Day crowd” (often a predominately White, middle class group of activists) with BIPOC activists “who have been doing the work [of social justice].” Smith asked, “How have these groups been able to have intentional conversation” to reach shared goals? She also stressed that “who is speaking [about a topic of concern to GBCS] is a really big question,” particularly which voices are included, and which are excluded.

For Smith, one of the biggest shifts at GBCS and in the social justice work of the denomination over the years is not the positions on issues held by the denomination, but rather who speaks for these issues on behalf of the church. As awareness has grown around who is impacted by various issues, including climate change, Smith said, GBCS

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<sup>104</sup> Hill, interview.

<sup>105</sup> Smith, interview.

(and the denomination) have made concerted efforts to make sure that those who speak on behalf of The UMC are those who are most impacted. The perspectives of poor communities, people of color, Indigenous communities, and others who are the most impacted by climate change have been intentionally centered as the most knowledgeable and effective advocates for the environmental goals of the denomination.

Environmental work in The UMC comes not only through and sometimes not even *primarily* through official denominational channels. Often, groups of people working in denominational caucuses are the leaders in advocacy and activism, pushing for eco-justice values both within the denomination and in the larger community. Caucus groups are both official and unofficial organizations related to The United Methodist Church that seek to influence the denomination and its polity through their various forms of actions and advocacy. Some caucuses represent racial/ethnic groups, some represent particular topics (ecological issues, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights), and some represent theological perspectives (progressive, “traditional”). Some caucuses enjoy an official relationship with the denomination, while others relate only through the denominational affiliation of their members. In the last chapter, I described the formation and work of the Eco-justice Working Group. I have also mentioned caucus groups and their role in denominational change, such as the Caretakers of God’s Creation Annual Conference group, who have submitted legislation to General Conference and engaged in eco-justice work in their communities. In this section, I review the work of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA), a caucus group that has worked for change within and through The UMC for over a century, and I share insights about activism and denominational change from the founder of Fossil Free UMC, a relatively young caucus

that advocates for the denomination's divestment from fossil fuels in its investment portfolios.

Though MFSA is not primarily an environmental caucus, justice issues related to care for the earth and its creatures have been a part of MFSA's work for many decades. MFSA serves as an example in the quest to more thoroughly investigate the potential of caucus groups to impact denominational polity.<sup>106</sup> MFSA began with a focus on encouraging the adoption of the denomination's first social creed in 1908, a reflection of the Social Gospel movement. It has continued to advocate for a wide range of social justice issues over the decades, with particular emphasis on war and peace, human rights, and eventually, advocacy for LGBTQ+ communities.<sup>107</sup>

Although environmental issues have rarely been the *top* priority for MFSA's activism, a thorough review of MFSA's regular publications reveals a steady inclusion of environmental advocacy over the decades of the case study period. I highlight a few notable issues of MFSA's publication, the *Social Questions Bulletin (SQB)* to illustrate the inclusion of eco-justice concerns in MFSA's work, especially when environmental

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<sup>106</sup> "Our History - Methodist Federation for Social Action," 2025, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.mfsaweb.org/our-history>. The Methodist Federation for Social Action (first called the Methodist Federation for Social Service) formed in 1907 by some Methodist Episcopal clergy to respond to "enormous human suffering among the working class." The Methodist Episcopal Church was a processor body of The Methodist Church and The United Methodist Church.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. George McClain, "Pioneering Social Gospel Radicalism: An Overview of the Methodist Federation for Social Action," in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Russell Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1993), 384-85. After years of repression to near extinction in the post-World War II era of McCarthyism, a season of rebuilding began in the 1960s. A new executive was hired, and MFSA's publication, the *Social Questions Bulletin*, addressed a number of progressive issues: racism in the church and society, opposition to war in Vietnam, and religious freedom, both from secular political maneuvering and from growing right-wing "attack." MFSA grew further in the 1970s, hiring George McClain as executive director and several field staff seminary interns, publishing major papers, and organizing new chapters in ten additional conferences.

issues received more sustained attention. *SQB* issues regularly raised concerns about nuclear weapons and nuclear power, including their environmental impact, and MFSA signed on to an ecumenical letter to President Carter in April 1979 on nuclear safety.<sup>108</sup> Several other *SQB*s in the 1970s and 1980s touched on other eco-justice issues like mountaintop-removal coal mining, farmworkers' rights and toxic waste. Nonhuman animals did garner some attention from MFSA: A short 1968 *SQB* column (the only animal centric one I found,) highlighted the work of George Abbe, a sometime *SQB* contributor who advocated for animals. Abbe protested the use of baboons in Ford's vehicle tests, and the "inhuman treatment" and killing of seals for fur. MFSA drew on Abbe to call attention to "the matter of good treatment of our non-human friends."<sup>109</sup> This kind of specific focus on nonhuman animals, however, was rare.

Ecological concerns made a rare "cover story" appearance in a 1994 *SQB*, hailing MFSA's crafting of language about ecologically responsible living that had been successfully adopted at the General Conference two years before. The article reported on the California-Pacific Annual Conference's implementation of the new language, which included printing materials on recycled paper with soy-based ink, organic gardening, highway cleanup, and "ecological model" congregations.<sup>110</sup> In advance of the 1996 General Conference, a "General Conference Update" column urged delegates to support a

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<sup>108</sup> Church of All Nations, April 1 1979. The brief letter warned against "the dangers of nuclear power to all humanity," called for a moratorium on the construction of nuclear facilities, and urged immediate exploration of alternative energies like wind, thermal, and solar power.

<sup>109</sup> Methodist Federation for Social Action, "Reverence for Life," *Social Questions Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (March-April 1968): 16.

<sup>110</sup> Methodist Federation for Social Action, "Addition to *Discipline* Aids Environmental Action," *Social Questions Bulletin* 84, no. 5 (1994): 1-4.

petition on sustainable living, noting that it would meet over Earth Day that year.

“Wouldn’t it be great if General Conference arranged to mark Earth Day by adopting petitions demonstrating our care for God’s creation?” the article asked.<sup>111</sup> A *SQB* listed “environmental justice” as one of MFSA’s six legislative priorities heading into General Conference 2000, along with economic and racial justice, strengthening theological integrity, supporting rights for LGBTQ+ persons, advocating for peace, and maintaining the denomination’s stance on reproductive choice.<sup>112</sup> Another General Conference 2000 lead-up *SQB* article elaborated on environmental justice concerns (here used in a general sense of environmental activism), including working for a stop to mountaintop removal coal mining, encouraging health institutions to stop toxic-producing incineration of medical waste, and affirming the 1992 Rio Declaration of Environment and Development.<sup>113</sup> MFSA also submitted several eco-themed petitions to GC 2000. One petition adopted by the GC, “Affirmation of the Precautionary Principle,” urged endorsement of a principle adopted by the Rio Declaration urging caution whenever uncertainty existed about the consequences to the environment of particular actions.<sup>114</sup> The petition noted a list of ongoing ecological warning signs, including “the dying off of

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<sup>111</sup> Methodist Federation for Social Action, "General Conference Update," *Social Questions Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (1996): 2.

<sup>112</sup> Methodist Federation for Social Action, "MFSA Board Sets Priorities for GC 2000," *Social Questions Bulletin* 89, no. 5 (1999): 3.

<sup>113</sup> Methodist Federation for Social Action, "General Conference Update," *Social Questions Bulletin* 90, no. 1 (2000): 5.

<sup>114</sup> The United Methodist Church, *Journal of the 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, June 14, 1992, 31 ILM 874.

plant and animal species,” and called on governments as well as individual United Methodists to adopt a precautionary principle.<sup>115</sup>

MFSA increased its digital presence and advocacy over the last two decades, shifting from print newsletters to online newsletters and emails as a primary method of communication. Currently, climate justice is one of six “Issue Areas” with a dedicated subtopic on their website. A small collection of articles populates the subtopic page, including stories connecting climate justice and Palestinian liberation, highlighting farmworker rights, encouraging divestment from fossil fuels, and urging local congregations to form “green teams.”<sup>116</sup> Prior to the 2020/2024 GC, MFSA advocated for delegates to “Vote Your Values.” The website listed several petitions it endorsed under each of seven “most pressing issues,” including Climate Justice, listed as their second priority. “Climate justice intersects with nearly every aspect of life” the page reads, including “economics, racial justice, and health. By voting for climate-conscious leaders and policies, we protect God’s creation and ensure the well-being of future generations.” Though the language of eco-justice is not used, the sentiments of intersectional justice are grounded in eco-justice theology. The site includes almost no mentions of nonhuman animals, except one page discussing how churches use their land. MFSA encourages congregations to see themselves as “human caretakers of all God had created here on Earth, including animals, creatures of the seas, birds of the air, as well as human” before

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. MFSA also offered revised legislation on dioxin and other toxics. Another petition, submitted by an individual, called for “Dealing with environmental health and safety in the workplace and community.” A petition seeking environmental protections for children was rejected, with delegates feeling the content of the petition was well-covered by other legislation.

<sup>116</sup> “Issue Areas,” 2025, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.mfsaweb.org/resources?category=Climate%20Justice#resources>.

noting that “humans are not working together in harmony with the rest of creation as God intended.” The suggested actions related to land use, however, involve only “planting native plants, removing invasive species (the directive does not clarify if this refers to plant or animal species), and stopping the use of “synthetics.”<sup>117</sup> It is fair to surmise that nonhuman animals are not a primary concern in MFSA’s environmental work.

An interview with former MFSA executive director George McClain demonstrated the ways in which affiliated but “unofficial” denominational groups can influence the denomination’s polity and actions. According to McClain, MFSA’s approach to successfully passing MFSA-endorsed legislation at General Conference was multi-pronged.<sup>118</sup> MFSA tried to get their legislative proposals passed by individual Annual Conferences, so that the number of (and size of) entities submitting legislation to GC was larger. MFSA members also sought election as General Conference delegates, and then tried to serve on legislative committees that had responsibility for discussing and recommending MFSA-endorsed petitions. MFSA also held pre-conference gatherings to brief “friendly delegates” on their legislative priorities.

MFSA’s approach “early on was to work with other denominational caucuses, both official and unofficial” such as the Affirmation gay caucus and denominational racial/ethnic caucus groups. He also commented that MFSA would sometimes support official legislative priorities from UMC boards and agencies, particularly GBCS, the General Board of Global Ministries, and the Women’s Division. “It wasn’t politic for

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<sup>117</sup> "MFSA Plumblines: Church Land Use," 2025, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.mfsaweb.org/generalconference/mfs-plumblines-churchlanduse>.

<sup>118</sup> George McClain, interview by Beth Quick, Telephone, January 4, 2025.

them to be *visibly* connected to us,” McClain said, “but we worked together informally. We cooperated in quiet ways.” MFSA could not be seen to have undue influence on official boards and agencies, especially when other (and often more conservative) caucuses did not have equal influence. This was because, as McClain observed, MFSA operates “to the left of the denomination, trying to push the denomination.” They knew that some of their legislative pushes would not pass, but MFSA hoped that they *would* be educational and make an impact. MFSA leadership also hoped that when their more progressive petitions were rejected, more moderate proposals from official agencies would seem “tamer” and more acceptable to people who were suspicious of social action, a good strategy for movement organizations. “We helped create some space for them,” McClain said. “Whether we succeeded or not, it was educational.”

Through lobbying General Conference delegates, through crafting petitions, through electing progressive delegates to GC and becoming part of board and agency staff and directors, MFSA has consistently employed a variety of strategies and channels to further their concerns within the denomination. McClain’s reflections on MFSA’s strategic approach are invaluable. MFSA was and is aware of its place inside the institution as an agitator, knowing that even if its full vision is not adopted by the denomination, MFSA can push at the boundaries, keeping the church from complacency and acceptance of injustice as the norm.

Aside from the broader justice work of MFSA, the work of the Fossil Free UMC caucus serves as another example of environmental social action in the denomination and of an individual actor helping to effect denominational change. In an interview with Jenny Phillips, founder of the Fossil-Free UMC movement, she recounted that early

experiences in her professional life led her to have confidence in her power as an individual to make an impact on institutions and denominations.<sup>119</sup> She first felt her call to ministry at Washington State-based United Methodist camp and retreat center Camp Indianola as a young person, but in her twenties, she learned that the camp was going to be sold. She decided to write to her bishop and obtained permission in 2001 to run a campaign to raise the funds needed to keep the camp as a denominational property. Phillips collaborated with a foundation and was able to raise two million dollars over six months.

Phillips said she learned at camp that creation, transformation, and discipleship were connected, and that she wanted to focus intentionally on these connections in her ministry. Phillips eventually went to seminary, was ordained, and began work in the Seattle area as the Creation Care Coordinator for her Annual Conference. After reading a 2013 article by environmentalist Bill McKibben in *Rolling Stone Magazine* calling for divestment from fossil fuels, Phillips found a new focus to her eco-activism.<sup>120</sup> She thought to herself, “We should figure out how The UMC can divest from fossil fuels,” and started working on a strategy to pass legislation at the Annual Conference and General Conference levels of the denomination.<sup>121</sup>

I started gathering people up, getting the word out, and meeting monthly. Thirteen Annual Conferences sent resolutions to [the 2016] General Conference to add fossil fuels to the [*Book of Discipline* requirements for responsible investment screening]. We were scrappy and flexible and had nothing to lose, going up

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<sup>119</sup> Phillips, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Bill McKibben, "The Case for Fossil-Fuel Divestment," *RollingStone*, 22 February, 2013, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-case-for-fossil-fuel-divestment-100243/>.

<sup>121</sup> Like McClain, Phillips used the strategy of having multiple Annual Conferences endorse and submit Fossil-Free UMC legislation to General Conference to amplify the impact of the caucus's efforts.

against Wespath [the denomination’s investment and benefits agency] with a lot of reputational value at stake. [Wespath] could put a report out that they crafted over six months, [but] we could publish a blog post in twenty-four hours.

In the process, Phillips realized that grassroots organizing could impact a “powerful organization like The UMC.” The divestment legislation failed at General Conference, but it “got to floor of General Conference, and [people] had a real conversation about it, even in midst of [legislation on] human sexuality being the only debate. It felt like a victory to even get [divestment] on the agenda, given importance of the other things on the agenda.” Phillips was stunned by the response to her efforts. “It felt like a moment when the people of the church were saying, ‘We’re worried about this, we care, and we want to engage.’” After General Conference, Phillips was elected to Wespath’s board of directors. “They were not excited to see me,” she quipped.<sup>122</sup>

Looking back on her work with Fossil Free UMC, Phillips was amazed at “how much opportunity there actually is in the church to make change,” although “you have to get to know the powers and interests. And you have to catch [those in the theological] middle, but if you can, you’ve got it.” Some people viewed Fossil Free UMC as an extremists group (which they were not), she said. Instead, what was perceived as by some as “extremism” was a deep commitment to see Fossil Free’s aims come to fruition. For Phillips, meeting their aims meant needing to build connections with everyone: “With

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<sup>122</sup> During her time at Wespath, the board adopted language referencing the “risks and opportunities” related to climate change, Phillips told me. It was the first time Wespath acknowledged that climate change had an impact on investments in any way. At the most recent 2020/2024 General Conference, which dealt with the schism and departure of the new Global Methodist Church, as well as deletion of exclusionary language for LGBTQ+ persons in the denomination, Phillips said that “the clock ran out” on acting on divestment language, disappointing Phillips and others who felt the legislation had a “real shot.” The proposed legislation was referred, however – to Wespath. In the Fall of 2025, Wespath held a consultation to discuss all of the social justice investment screens in the *Book of Discipline*, with invited leaders representing a wide variety of perspectives. The consultation group will work on legislation to submit to the 2028 General Conference.

folks trying to get traction on an issue, [folks have to] step back and dialogue with people who might not support you, or even actively oppose you. We need more of that in the church, in the world - to learn from one another.”

Now, Phillips works on the staff of the General Board of Global Ministries, working for environmental sustainability from within the denominational hierarchy. “I’m totally a bureaucrat now,” she joked, yet she seeks to “bring the activist values” to her work. As an agency leader, she has to relate differently to constituents in the denomination, but she still works for the values she holds dear. “I can be a voice,” she concluded. “I can’t do [activism] publicly the way I was doing it before,” but she can create space and pathways for those who have filled her shoes.

The work of both MFSA and Fossil Free UMC show avenues for denominational and social change, accomplished through networking, collaboration, partnering with denominational leadership or grassroots activists as needed. In the next chapter, I will further analyze the impact of both caucus groups and individual activists on denominational change. Building on the scholarship of historian Kenneth Rowe, sociologist Darryl Stephens, ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and others, I ask what kind of impact these approaches have on the social justice values of large institutions like The UMC.<sup>123</sup>

### The Revised Social Principles

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<sup>123</sup> Kenneth E. Rowe, "How Do Caucuses Contribute to Connection," in *United Methodism and American Culture Volume 4: Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*; Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*.

As I prepare to turn to a wider examination of institutional and denominational change in Chapter 3, I turn finally to the 2020/2024 GC, where delegates adopted a completely revised Social Principles. The 2020 GC finally met in 2024, postponed for a quadrennium because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The General Conference met shortly after the Global Methodist Church (GMC) was formed, the conservative breakaway denomination formed primarily in response to matters of human sexuality. The GMC wished to secure obedience and further codification of the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from leadership roles, access to ordination, and equal marriage rights in the church.<sup>124</sup> The departure of such a significant block of The UMC denomination meant addressing matters of disaffiliation occupied much time and attention at the 2020 GC. However, many delegates advocated for passing three major pieces of legislation: regionalization of the denomination, giving national church bodies more autonomy and ability to contextualize, removal of exclusionary language toward LGBTQ+ persons from the *Book of Discipline*, and approval of the revised Social Principles, the culmination of the eight-year revision process first enabled by the 2012 General Conference.<sup>125</sup>

I interviewed Rev. Dr. Mark Davies, an environmental ethicist, scholar, and activist with United Methodist Creation Justice Ministries and Fossil-Free UMC, who served as the convener of the writing team for “The Natural World” section of the Social Principles. Davies recounted that GBCS had been assigned the task of leading the mandated revision process by the General Conference, and so proceeded to hold listening

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<sup>124</sup> Heather Hahn, "US Delegates Name General Conference Goals," *UM News*, March 22 2024, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/us-delegates-name-general-conference-goals>.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* The revised Social Principles, then, were crafted *before* the denominational split.

sessions across the global denomination from 2012-2016 to solicit feedback on what needed to be changed in the existing Principles.<sup>126</sup> Respondents' input coalesced around three themes, Davies reported: The Social Principles needed to be less U.S.-centric, more concise, and they needed better theological grounding. After reporting their initial work to the 2106 General Conference, GBCS was then tasked with bringing a proposed revised Social Principles to the 2020 General Conference, the gathering eventually held in 2024. Subsequently, an international group of lay and clergy members from across global United Methodism was convened to study and revise the Social Principles.

The revised Social Principles, which were adopted by delegates mostly without revision, made substantial changes to the section previously known as “The Natural World.” Significantly, the new section addressing environmental concerns was renamed “The Community of All Creation,” finally putting these principles on par with the rest of the Social Principles, all of which already used the “community” language. Jessica Smith credited UMC social justice activist Randall Miller with advocating for the shift in language, urging the revision committee to consider “what constitutes a community,” and encouraging an “almost existentialist framework for understanding the human being” that decenters the human and puts them on equal footing in a wide web of creation.<sup>127</sup> Davies shared that changing the name of the section was the result of “easy consensus” in the writing team. “The Natural World” language, absent of the word “community,” suggests an empty space that is the stage for activity for human beings. By adopting “community” language, the name implies that creation is full of all creatures who are in relationship

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<sup>126</sup> Mark Davies, interview by Beth Quick, 5 September, 2025.

<sup>127</sup> Smith, interview.

with one another, creating potential for rethinking the role and significance of nonhuman animals, enshrining a more non-anthropocentric theological framework for eco-justice in The UMC.

The new “Community of All Creation” section is further divided into two subsections: “Creation in Peril,” and the “Stewardship of Creation.” The preface to the section establishes a theological framework that moves toward the non-anthropocentric framework to which eco-justice aspires:

Human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, and other sentient and non-sentient beings participate in the community of creation, and their flourishing depends on the care of all God’s creation. Rather than treating creation as if it were placed here solely for humanity’s use and consumption, we are called to practice responsible stewardship and to live in right relationship with the Creator and with the whole of God’s creation.<sup>128</sup>

The language here explicitly decenters the human by including humans in a list with other aspects of creation, all on even footing. Focusing on interdependence in creation, the new language better embodies eco-justice theology.

The “Creation in Peril” subsection states, “We confess that the degradation and wholesale destruction of the natural environment threatens unprecedented harm, bringing danger to human and nonhuman life alike.”<sup>129</sup> This section includes a paragraph on the “Destruction of Ecosystems,” which speaks about the ecological importance of the “myriads of symbiotic relationships between living organisms such as animals, plants,

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<sup>128</sup> The United Methodist Church, *United Methodist Social Principles*, (Washington, DC: 2024), 9, <https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/124>.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

insects, and microorganisms.”<sup>130</sup> Other sections in *Creation in Peril* include paragraphs on global warming and climate change and dependence on fossil fuels.

The second subsection is the “Stewardship of Creation,” which includes paragraphs on environmental racism, sustainable policies and practices, food justice, caring for all creatures, protecting space, and affirming science and traditional wisdom.<sup>131</sup> The “Caring for All Creatures” paragraph, which replaces the “Animal Life” paragraph present in all versions of the Social Principles since their 1972 introduction, significantly expands, both in length and in depth of content, the denomination’s direct statements about nonhuman animals. I include it here in its entirety:

We support the respectful and humane treatment of animals, who are crucial participants in God’s ongoing creation and of inherent worth. We embrace biblical teachings that envision a time when humans and other creatures shall live in peace and harmony in a restored creation (Isa. 11:6).

This commitment to respectful and humane treatment of animals means, for instance, putting in place protections to ensure that animals employed in agriculture and other forms of labor are free from cruel or abusive types of treatment and provided with ample rest and nourishment. Additionally, we oppose forcing animals to combat each other.

Animals raised for human consumption should be provided with healthy living conditions and sufficient food and water. Animals raised for human consumption must likewise be reared in humane conditions and slaughtered in a manner that minimizes their overall suffering and pain.

With respect to creatures living in the wild, we urge cooperative efforts by international bodies, governments, civic institutions, churches, and concerned individuals and groups to end poaching and protect endangered and vulnerable species and preserve dwindling habitats. We decry the mass extinctions currently underway and call for the adoption of sustainable policies and practices that allow both animal and human life to flourish.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 10-13.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 12.

Davies shared that the writing team did *not* find consensus on all areas of the above language. Some, like Davies, wanted the new language to at least encourage people to reduce meat consumption, both for environmental benefits and for the welfare of animals. The team did agree, however, that *since* animals are used for food, the Social Principle must at least address the lives of animals and their living conditions.

The new language as adopted includes notable aspects. First, the inclusion of Isaiah 11:6 and the statement about animals as inherently worthy and part of God's creation mark the first time the Social Principles included any biblical or theological language in relation to nonhuman animals, in line with Davies' comments that listening sessions revealed a desire for more theological grounding in the Principles as a whole. Second, although previous *Disciplines* mentioned types of labor animals perform (typically for human benefit), this new Social Principles paragraph is the first to definitively name what animals do for humans as *labor*, recognizing their work, and adopting terminology that evokes comparisons between human and animal labor expectations. The new language calls for rest and nourishment for animals, and seems to acknowledge animals as individual beings, with their own lives and desire for well-being. The new text concludes, as in the past, with an emphasis on the protection of species of animals, but in the expanded context of the revised paragraph, the focus on species is balanced with attention to other aspects of animal life. Despite the deeply transformed language about animals in the new Social Principles, it remains to be seen whether the revised text will lead to a different or heightened attention to nonhuman animals in praxis, in legislative action. The language does provide an encouraging *potential* foundation, however, for attention to the moral worth of individual animals.

## Conclusions

Through study of archival documents, analyzing interviews, tracing General Conference legislation, and reviewing general agency and caucus documents, I have constructed a detailed portrait of the eco-justice movement in the context of The UMC. An analysis of General Conference legislation from 1972 and through the 2020/2024 GC reveals a slow but consistent introduction of and expansion of eco-justice principles. Examining the emergence, growth, and shifting of eco-justice activism over the decades, my findings support several of my initial claims. First, The UMC has operated within an eco-justice framework, consistent with Laurel Kearns' typology of expressions of Christian environmentalism. The theological claims expressed in legislation adopted by The UMC align with the theology of eco-justice, focusing on a God who creates and cares for all aspects of creation, and a God who desires humans to seek justice for all creatures. The UMC also embodies an eco-justice theoethic in its multilayered approach to environmental advocacy, weaving ecological concerns into polity related to race, gender, economics, and more.

The eco-justice movement within UMC structures also demonstrates how eco-justice thrives in institutions, relying on established ecumenical and intrachurch connections to achieve its goals, bolstered by the structures and hierarchy of the denomination. Rather than functioning primarily as a grassroots movement, much of eco-justice activism happens in The UMC primarily through official denominational and ecumenical channels. Although official and unofficial caucus groups play a significant role in denominations polity and practice, official structures have a primary place in

shaping environmental policy. Most of *The Book of Discipline*'s major ecological Social Principles and resolutions either originated from or were revised by recommendations and language crafted from the General Board of Church and Society. The actions of GBCS and its Environmental Justice work area reveal a remarkable through line of attention to broad eco-justice themes. GBCS, often working with Eco-Justice Working Group ecumenical partners, has given decades-long attention to climate change, agricultural concerns, the relationship between economics and the environment, and environmental racism. Studying the board's actions related to eco-justice concerns also reveals the wide scope of authority GBCS has in interpreting actions taken at General Conference by prioritizing mandates from the General Conference, Social Principles, and *Book of Resolutions*. GBCS has had considerable latitude, despite increasingly limited funds, in deciding how to allocate its staff time and budget dollars, and board members, guided by staff members, discuss and approve decisions ranking any particular legislative focus.

Despite the significant power of denominational agencies in setting the priorities for eco-justice advocacy, and despite a large and top-heavy denominational structure in The UMC that favors the denominational perspective in the adoption of legislation, the case study makes clear the impact that even individuals can have within the institution in advocating for positions. Jeania Ree Moore's experiences illustrate that while individuals might encounter obstacles in shifting agency priorities, individuals can still take action, using existing relationships to subtly create space for topics of concern. Jenny Phillips's work in founding Fossil-Free UMC showed how an individual can form a caucus and garner denomination-wide attention in a relatively short amount of time, creating change.

The ability of individuals and caucus groups to influence the action of a major church agency through strategies like those outlined by McClain and Phillips, which in turn plays a significant role in crafting denominational polity, is a promising factor in considering the ability of the church to lead in moral social visioning. Individuals and caucuses can clearly shape the denomination by providing a continuing call to justice for creation.

The case study also shows the development of a relationship between the eco-justice movement and a more people-centered environmental justice movement, growing in the 1980s, solidifying in the 1990s, and then remaining the dominant expression. The UMC's long-standing stated support for racial justice and its then affirmation of and partnership with the environmental justice movement has resulted in denominational eco-justice advocacy primarily on concerns that impact human communities. The support of people-centered environmentalism even retroactively shapes staff members' perception of the eco-justice movement in The UMC. Newer staff, who did not work at GBCS in the 1970s and 1980s when the eco-justice movement was forming, and who seem less aware of the timeline of the birth of the environmental justice movement, incorrectly assume that The UMC's longstanding use of "environmental justice" language has always signified an emphasis on racial justice.

The review of eco-justice work in The UMC also affirms that the intense, enduring conflict over anti-LGBTQ+ denominational policies and the activist work to change these policies had an impact on the time available during General Conference sessions, reducing time to discuss any other important social justice issues aside from those related to human sexuality. The incredible energy required from caucus groups like

MFSA in their work for queer inclusion meant channeling much of their resources of time, energy, personnel and money into confronting the ongoing injustice of LGBTQ+ exclusion, lessening their ability to attend to the other justice issues important to them. At the same time, the case study revealed ways that animalizing rhetoric has been used to do harm to LGBTQ+ people, employing the same kind of dehumanizing tactics that have been used to perpetuate racist ideologies. Such rhetoric reinforces problematic dualistic constructions that reinforce heteronormative and White supremacist narratives depicting queer people and people of color as closer to nature and more animal-like.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, the case study also makes starkly clear how little attention has been given to nonhuman animals in UMC polity; even the few existing Principles and resolutions that mention animals primarily address the preservation of *species* of animals, and have been given little legislative attention by eco-justice staffers in denominational agencies, or by leaders in caucus groups. When animals *have* been part of legislative work, they have been discussed mostly in relation to the Endangered Species Act and the preservation of species of animals, or have been part of legislation that focuses on environmental impacts on humans. Although a few recent staff members mentioned the collaboration between CreatureKind, Creation Justice Ministries, and GBCS (along with other mainline denominations), this collaboration was initiated by CreatureKind, and connected mostly to one staff member at GBCS, Moore, who took a particular interest in nonhuman animals. Although Moore's advocacy shows the impact an individual might have in raising a particular issue with the larger denominational network, Moore is no

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<sup>133</sup> I discuss decolonial and feminist responses to this rhetoric in chapters 4 and 5.

longer connected either with GBCS or with CreatureKind.<sup>134</sup> Further, a few staff members specifically referred to the environmental approach of The UMC as anthropocentric in nature. Although The UMC has operated from an eco-justice framework, with a clear emphasis on interlocking justice concerns related to the environment, in practice, eco-justice work enacted in the denomination has consistently centered the human, as is true in many denominations. The Revised Social Principles suggest that there is room for change in the denomination's focus on nonhuman animals, and I will consider future possibilities in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion.

In Chapter 3, I zoom out from the case study focus of this chapter, centered on a single denominational expression of the eco-justice movement, to a wider focus of denominational and institutional change. Building on themes raised here related to the power of institutions, caucuses, and individual activists, I turn next to explore how denominations encourage or ignore, suppress or support social change movements that seek to disrupt the status quo to champion causes of justice.

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<sup>134</sup> Additionally, CreatureKind encountered major funding issues for their work in 2023-2024, which resulted in the cessation, for the short term at least, of their efforts to engage with churches at the denominational level.

## CHAPTER THREE: DENOMINATIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

### POWER AND POTENTIAL

“Every victory is a qualified victory. The institutions with which we engage and in which we operate – none of them are built to be quickly responsive to the urgency of crises. We have seen marginal progress.” – John Hill, former Interim General Secretary, General Board of Church and Society<sup>1</sup>

The “comforting capacity of religion often provides sacred legitimation for the way things are, and thus also for the suppression of dissent and opposition to those in power. The same aspects of religious systems that legitimate practices and institutions by sacred authorization, however, can also challenge an unjust social order by providing a transcendent vision of justice.” – Matthew B. Immergut and Laurel Kearns, sociologists<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 2, I investigated the eco-justice movement in The United Methodist Church to illustrate the lack of attention to nonhuman animals, and especially individual nonhuman animals, in the denomination’s social statements and advocacy work.

Alongside my claim about the anthropocentric leanings of the eco-justice movement in practice in The UMC, I also highlighted ways in which various parties worked for change related to eco-justice concerns, both within the denomination and in the larger society.

Individuals, caucus groups, and denominational staff and agencies all play a part in environmental activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, interview; General Council on Finance and Administration, *The United Methodist Church Budget Handbook 2025-2028* (2025), <https://www.gcfa.org/resource/united-methodist-church-budget-handbook>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew B. Immergut and Laurel Kearns, "When Nature Is Rats and Roaches: Religious Eco-Justice Activism in Newark, NJ," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 6, no. 2 (2012): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v6i2.176>.

Now, I widen my scope to make a broader argument about the nature of social change as I examine the U.S. denominational system, particularly mainline Protestantism, within which the eco-justice movement took shape. I argue that institutions, like church denominations, are powerful entities that can tend toward reinforcing some dominant views, even while working to dismantle others, unless the institution encounters successfully persistent demands for change. Looking at denominational and institutional change in the U.S. from multiple angles, I begin with a consideration of the ways denominations like The United Methodist Church are susceptible to reinforcing rather than challenging or deconstructing problematic perspectives like harmful forms of anthropocentrism. I ask how denominational hierarchies and systems reinscribe the status quo, even when failure to change reveals a disparity between an institution's stated mission and their practices and actions. I use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (described below), in concert with his interpreters, to better understand how and under what conditions a denomination resists or opens to change. I make use of interlocutors such as religion scholar Jane Ellen Nickell and ethicist Willis Jenkins, both of whom draw on Bourdieu in their own examinations of institutional power and social change. Using their work, I outline ways in which The UMC, because of its authority over member congregations and individuals, its hierarchical system, and its polity design, resists change even when changes are consistent with the denomination's stated values, instead reifying problematic worldviews like anthropocentrism. The eco-justice movement, then, functioning in the mainline denominational context, can fail to dismantle human-centric theoethics, instead reverting to the dominant worldview.

In conversation with theologians like Jennifer Ayres and Henrik Pieterse, and ethicists Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, in addition to pulling more from Jenkin's work, I take on their varied presentations of a similar theme: the theoethical foundations of institutions and social movements *matter*. Christian denominations claim a theological identity that is a motivator for social change or for resistance to change. I consider how a denomination's theoethical identity relates to its receptivity to movements such as the eco-justice movement, and how a denomination might intentionally nurture its theoethical core to be better prepared to embody its values. I then narrow my focus to the United Methodist context. With interlocutors who examine the particularities of United Methodism, such as sociologists Steven M. Tipton and Darryl Stephens, I trace aspects of Methodist history, practice, and Wesleyan theoethics that impact how the denomination leads in social change and *responds* to social change efforts from activists within its membership.

Considering the tendencies of entrenched institutions like mainline Protestant churches to resist change and reinforce prevailing norms, I ask of what significance are the efforts of individuals and caucuses groups in advocating for denominational and social change? I bolster the claims made in the case study that the efforts of a caucus or even a single person rightly placed within the denomination *can* effect change. Drawing on the work of UMC historian Kenneth Rowe alongside the other United Methodist scholars I have already mentioned, I continue to show that despite the systems and structures which resist reform, new pathways for the institutional church are possible and can be carved out by a small group.

Finally, I circle back to the topic of eco-justice, examining the how mainline Protestant churches as institutions can sometimes foster or suppress environmental social movements. Connecting with scholarship from scholars like Bradford Verter, Matthew Immergut, and Laurel Kearns, I describe how the environmental movement has intersected with mainline churches, since they have sometimes been strong and resource-rich supporters of faith-based environmentalism. I explore some of the reasons for the church's support of eco-movements, leaning towards potential and possibility for the future of a more robust, non-anthropocentric eco-justice theoethic in practice.

### Denominations and Institutional Power

Christian ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda examines the nature of “evil” entrenched in systems and institutions in her work *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. She urges asking the question of individuals and institutions: “Who benefits and who loses from ‘the way things are?’”<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, the institutional church fails to resist evil because the church itself is benefitting from structural evil, letting oppressive structures persist as they are.<sup>4</sup> The United Methodist Church, a hierarchical mainline Protestant denomination, has the power (and the motivation) to reinforce or to challenge dominant cultural views, including the societal norm of a harmful

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<sup>3</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Moe-Lobeda describes her term “structural evil” as “forces that bind our power to live in ways that ‘love neighbor as self’ and to protect Earth’s well-being. These forces include intricate webs of interrelated power arrangements, ideologies, values, practices, policies, and ways of perceiving reality that span generations and have unintended snowballing consequences. The language of evil, especially structural or systemic evil, may be misinterpreted in a sense that would severely undermine central points of this book. By structural evil, I do not refer to metaphysical forces beyond human agency. To the contrary, while structural evil may be beyond the power of individuals to counter, it is composed of power arrangements and other factors that are humanly constructed and therefore may be dismantled by other human decisions and collective actions.” Ibid., 2-3.

anthropocentric ecological perspective. Indeed, its history is a complex dance between those positions. Despite the dedicated support of the eco-justice movement by The UMC, and despite eco-justice's claim of nonanthropocentric values, I suggest that the denomination sometimes acts in ways that reinscribe rather than reshape anthropocentric norms.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu helps to understand these dynamics. Bourdieu defines a *habitus* as the

... systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.<sup>5</sup>

Adapting Bourdieu's *habitus* to the field of denominations, religious institutions are "structuring structures," both shaping and shaped by people that are a part of them. I extrapolate from Bourdieu's theories of priestly and prophetic power to consider how social change occurs in The UMC, and what obstacles tend to thwart movements with religious structures.<sup>6</sup> Expanding on his definition of *habitus*, Bourdieu writes that the *habitus* is what enables institutions to exist and thrive. The *habitus* "exploits the body's readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social, that the king, the banker

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu's priestly and prophetic power language draws on sociologist Max Weber's concept of ideal-types. Weber frequently utilizes his concept of ideal-types as "logical constructs" for research. He describes ideal-types as investigative tools where the researcher uses a "correct" model of a "normative attitudes" in a typical role people fill in societies as an objective measure against which to study and observe actual people/groups of people for assessment. Some of Weber's ideal-types include the figures like king, priest and prophet, and these are some of the ideal-types on which Bourdieu focuses. Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1949), 42-43.

or the priest are hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church made flesh.”<sup>7</sup> From Bourdieu’s perspective, institutions can be challenged, but the process is difficult, and institutions are resistant to change. Religious groups function as “fields,” microcosms that have their own social universe and laws.<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu theorizes that when competition emerges in a religious group (as in other fields), and a prophetic movement challenges the established power (priestly power, in Bourdieu’s Weberian construction), the priestly group responds by reasserting its claims of orthodoxy, since preserving the status quo, the *habitus*, will ensure those with power *keep* their power.<sup>9</sup> He writes,

Competition for religious power owes its specificity (particularly in relation to the competition that takes place in the political field, for example) to the fact that what is at stake is the *monopoly of the legitimate exercise of the power to modify, in a deep and lasting fashion, the practice and world-view of lay people, by imposing on and inculcating in them a particular religious habitus*. By this I mean a lasting, generalized and transposable disposition to act and think in conformity with the principles of a (quasi) systematic view of the world and human existence.<sup>10</sup>

Those who hold religious authority have significant power to shape the very *habitus* of a broad community’s worldview, and such significant power, then, is held tightly.

Dominant groups in the U.S. context - those who are white, male, cisgender,

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu uses the term field to describe the “social universe” in which interactions take place. He writes, “To speak of the field is to name this microcosm, which is also a social universe but a social universe freed from a certain number of the constraints that characterise the encompassing social universe, a universe that is somewhat apart, endowed with its own laws, its own nomos, without being completely independent of the external laws.” Pierre Bourdieu, “The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field,” in *Pierre Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber’s Sociology of Religion,” in *Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity*, ed. Sam Whimster and Scott Lash (London: Routledge, 1987). Emphasis in original.

heterosexual, educated, for example - have enormous social and cultural capital and privilege that goes unrecognized because these dominant “traits” become the norm that shapes everyone and everything in a social system. Those who conform to the norm become what “power” and “authority” look like, and those that challenge norms and those who embody norms are then often marked by “difference” in some key form. Dominant traits resonate with the *habitus* of a field, until the dominant group is disrupted, causing change in power structures.<sup>11</sup>

Some social change takes place within a *habitus*, writes Bourdieu, but its scope is often limited. The *habitus* limits and constrains; the capacity for change is “infinite yet strictly limited” by the *habitus*, creating a narrow, socially constructed channel in which change can occur.<sup>12</sup> The *habitus* is also self-protecting, warding off challenges, prepared to “reinforce its dispositions” by making it seem beneficial for things to remain as they are.<sup>13</sup> The effort to enact reform comes in the role of prophetic power in Bourdieu’s construction. The prophet, Bourdieu writes, “stands opposed to the priestly body as the *discontinuous* to the *continuous*.”<sup>14</sup> The prophet has power too, Bourdieu says, but the prophet’s power ebbs and flows based on how eager the society is for religion and what “supply of religion” is on offer. The priest, the institutional religion, however, gets

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<sup>11</sup> Priests, in Weber’s construction of ideal types, are the protectors of a society’s sacred norms. These norms are expansive and include economic norms and hegemonic norms of those in power in a society. Prophets, by contrast, are figures who claim authority from personal revelation and charisma either in person or in doctrine. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, [1922] 1993), 22, 46; Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures, Habitus, Practices,” in *Rethinking the Subject: An Anthology of Contemporary European Social Thought*, ed. James Faubion (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, “Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber’s Sociology of Religion,” 127. Emphasis in original.

“authority deriving from [the priest’s] very function.”<sup>15</sup> The priest’s power is assumed, held by virtue of office, with legitimacy granted by the power structure, the hierarchy. Social change within institutions, within churches in this instance, occurs in part, then, when a prophetic movement is able, under the right circumstances, to disrupt the status quo. “The prophet is the man of crisis situations,” writes Bourdieu, able to enact change in a resistant *habitus* when “the whole future is suspended.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, when the urgency of a given social situation is significant enough, the prophetic movement can make change, because the limits of the *habitus* have been reached. In the case of the eco-justice movement, then, the sense of “crisis” experienced by massive cultural upheaval and shifts in the 1960s and 1970s created a favorable condition for the prophetic movement of ecological justice to make an impact on mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>17</sup> The sense of crisis that results in social upheaval, however, is not always long-lasting, permanent, or pervasive throughout an institution, and the status quo quickly seeks to absorb or diminish change.

Jane Ellen Nickell delves into The UMC institution’s resistance to change in her work *We Shall Not Be Moved: Methodists Debate Race, Gender, and Homosexuality*. Nickell traces major debates and changes in The United Methodist Church and its predecessor bodies over the last century. Nickell asks: “Who holds the power in the UMC ... not just to lead churches, but to decide who those leaders will be? How do

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 128. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 34.

<sup>17</sup> The introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 all address some of the cultural upheaval that created the right moment for the eco-justice movement to emerge.

changes in authority structures occur, and why is it such a long and painful process?”<sup>18</sup> To answer her questions, Nickell draws heavily on Bourdieu, exploring themes of social domination and the ways that social power systems privilege religious leadership by white heterosexual men by connecting the established order with God’s will.<sup>19</sup> Nickell, focusing mostly on debates in U.S. Methodism over the decades related to racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ justice and inclusion, posits that groups already holding power in the denomination (like white heterosexual cisgender men) “do not recognize the interest that drives them to preserve their leadership.” In the absence of self-awareness, those holding power instead use “theological, moral, and practical arguments” to champion their positions, casting doubt on the perspectives of minoritized groups and guaranteeing the continuing of a beneficial social order.<sup>20</sup> Black feminist ethicist Traci C. West writes that the institutional church has a “fundamental commitment to conserving tradition and ritualizing the virtue of sameness, that is, of uninterrupted continuity in the apparatus of control.”<sup>21</sup> An absence of self-awareness of those in power is a privilege that harms those without power. The dominant group in the institution seeks, with or without self-acknowledgement, to manipulate everyone into believing that the oppression of minoritized groups is not only good for those in power, but actually morally good for those being dominated as well. Those in power claim that the existing social order brings

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<sup>18</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Traci C. West, "Disruption," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2022): 284, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/886254>.

spiritual blessings to everyone, says Nickell, upholding “God’s order.”<sup>22</sup> Prophetic movements challenge the boundaries set by those in power in an institution – the boundaries that establish both who is included in the institution and who has authority in the institution.<sup>23</sup> In response, institutions aim to communicate that their boundaries are “holy and absolute,” divinely inspired.<sup>24</sup>

Given, then, the ability of the status quo of society to be cast not just as how things are, but how things *should be*, even how *God* wants thing to be, working for change is even more difficult. Prophetic movements are typically challenging boundaries that are part of the complex system of dualisms that give “social and religious meaning” to many Western and westernized societies.<sup>25</sup> Working for change from within systems can be laden with obstacles, since prophets are still operating within the same *habitus*. In *Life Among the Powers: A Political Spirituality of Resistance*, theologian Rick Elgendy argues that both communities and individuals seeking to work for social change are “subjected to the patterning and forming influence of structural power, and therefore neither in itself is a sign under which one can feel assured of faithful agency and life in the political world.”<sup>26</sup> The *habitus* of both institutions *and* those who seek to reform institutions shapes (and sometimes constrains) everyone – and without an awareness of

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<sup>22</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 151.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the conservative theology in The UMC insists that the boundaries excluding LGBTQ+ persons are not oppressive, but rather adhering to the holiness demanded by God’s word as revealed in the Bible. *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-55.

<sup>26</sup> Elgendy, *Life Among the Powers*, Chapter 1.

how people and groups are enmeshed in social structures, meaningful change will prove impossible.

The persistence of anthropocentrism in mainline traditions makes sense when examined through this lens; decentering the human is boundary-challenging work resisted by an ecclesial and secular culture that wants to maintain the social order. Indeed, to embrace such a stance would put The UMC in high tension with the larger society. Many religious traditions rely on concepts of “the animal” and the idea of animality as a contrast for understanding humanity. The human/animal binary in some religions serves to shape the purpose and place of what the human is and is not. Ethicist Anna L. Peterson speaks of the conundrum people experience in trying to figure out the place of both human and nonhuman animals in the world: “People are animals, yet animals are part of nature; nature is everything that is not human (or human-created); thus we cannot be animals.”<sup>27</sup> Many religions rely on human/animal binaries to assign everyone and everything to its proper place. At the same time, argues ethicist and religious historian Aaron Gross, “a complex intellectual-cultural apparatus constantly hides the importance of the animal, thus making the category of the human, which is so decisive to the study of religions, appear natural and relatively unproblematic.”<sup>28</sup> So, when the eco-justice movement tries to embody a non-anthropocentric worldview within a denominational framework, resistance comes not only through the movement’s efforts to mesh with the

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<sup>27</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University, 2015), 14.

values of other prophetic movements, but also from a deeply embedded religious worldview that relies on a sharp human/animal binary.

In his book *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*, Willis Jenkins also draws on Bourdieu, pointing out that in Bourdieu's view of culture, social action is limited by the *habitus* of a culture, allowing only for problems and solutions already contained in the field. When a culture faces "unprecedented problems," like climate change, denialism can result, because the *habitus* "suppress[es] recognition of threats that its range of creativity cannot meet."<sup>29</sup> West, too, notes the key role of denial in the pervasiveness of institutional oppression. Writing about the absence of attention to racism and White supremacy as factors in homophobia and transphobia in church polity and practice, West argues that oppressive actions "[collude] with denial, that is, with the privilege of denying white entitlement to have their whiteness ignored. In short, denial insistently normalizes such devaluation within institutional processes."<sup>30</sup> Denialism allows the existing *habitus* to remain firmly in place.

Nickell likewise notes the limitations and persistence of the *habitus*. Even when a society, including the churches within a society, has experienced ostensible changes, the cultural *habitus* has *not* shifted, she argues. For example, even though the Civil Rights movement led to a collapse of some racist laws and structures within the United States, and within U.S. churches (including The UMC), a persisting racist cultural habitus "[suggests] the durability of domination patterns" that continues to resist the efforts of

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<sup>29</sup> Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 91.

<sup>30</sup> West, "Disruption," 285.

system-changing racial justice and equality.<sup>31</sup> When the social order is challenged and when a prophetic social movement successfully disrupts the norms, institutions and systems seek to reassert authority. In the church, this sometimes appears as a reemergence of orthodoxy, however so defined.<sup>32</sup> In The UMC, it is possible that the recent schism between The UMC and the newly formed Global Methodist Church represents a significant enough shift in the denominational *habitus*, creating an opportunity for a change in the social order. The removal of language that excludes LGBTQ+ persons from full participation, marriage, and ordination in The UMC suggests at the 2020/2024 GC suggests a permanent stretching of the habitus. Whether a deeper shift in denominational identity is afoot remains to be seen, and I return to this question in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion.

Elgendy also addresses the persistence of institutional structures. Adopting theologian William Stringfellow’s language of “the powers” for institutional hierarchies, Elgendy writes about an institution’s survival, which he says is the true primary purpose of institutions. The “logic of institutions” requires everything to be “sacrificed” in order for it to be preserved, and everyone connected to “the powers” to commit to serving this purpose of survival. Although institutions make other claims about their purpose, these purposes obscure the true “self-serving function.”<sup>33</sup> Prophetic, activist work in the church, then, is when individuals or groups of people work in opposition to ecclesial

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<sup>31</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 50. Nickell wrote her work in 2014. The present climate of White Supremacy in the United States validates her arguments, as the habitus of racism has certainly persisted to emerge into a rebounded climate of acceptable racial oppression.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> Elgendy, *Life Among the Powers*, Chapter 1.

power that is prioritizing survival over all else. The church is called to be different than other institutional powers, but when the church fails to resist the tendency toward prioritizing institutional survival, for Elgandy, it has conformed to the world.<sup>34</sup> Elgandy pushes even beyond Stringfellow, claiming that “complicity is total in scope, which is to say that human persons and communities *cannot* access positions of exteriority to powers.”<sup>35</sup> Further, Elgandy believes that resistance to “the powers” is impossible as long as one is also complicit with “the powers.” Trying to resist the institution while one remains complicit in some way is simply reorganizing what exists.<sup>36</sup> Elgandy does not abandon hope for thoughtful resistance and social activism, however. While the powers “have a deforming effect on us,” acts of resistance can *change* the powers, making them more tolerable, and offering people a way to flourish even as they continue to work for justice.<sup>37</sup>

Elgandy’s work overgeneralizes complicity with the powers and is short on details of how what he offers as resistance is different from existing forms of activism. He does not clarify sufficiently how his vision of spiritual resistance stands apart from the resistance work he views as more complicit with institutional powers. “This is not a manual of spiritual practices,” he excuses.<sup>38</sup> His insights contribute meaningfully, however, to understanding thinking about how institutions – even faith-based institutions

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1, emphasis mine.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Chapter 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

like denominations – are inevitably bound up in concern for survival which makes institutional pursuit of justice a complicated endeavor. Elgendy also emphasizes that even resistance work is not free of clouded motivations and entanglement with “the powers,” as the examination of the animal rights movement in Chapter 4 will illustrate. Applying his theories to the eco-justice movement in *The UMC*, Elgendy’s work is a reminder that all the “actors” in the eco-justice movement – the denominational leadership (including bishops, General Conference delegates, board and agency staff, and agency board of directors) *and* caucus groups and individual activists – bring complicated motivations to their pursuit of the “mission” of the church and their pursuit of justice. As I mentioned in the case study, for example, Creation Justice Ministries leadership acknowledged that they sometimes had to adjust their legislative priorities based on what kind of grant funding they could secure for a given issue area. In turn, their focus is pulled away from unfunded ecological concerns, even if theoretically these concerns are the issues the organization would most like to address.

While some scholars like those above look at institutions and social change through a very theoretical lens, others specialize in detailed, concrete explorations of institutional and denominational power in practice. Sociologist Donald A. Luidens expounds on how denominations manage and use their power. Luidens discusses the “corporate denomination,” a term he draws from theologians Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler that describes the denominational organizational structures in mainline U. S. Protestantism in the twentieth century that reflect the businesses and bureaucracies of modernity.<sup>39</sup> In the corporate denomination model, churches have a complex

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<sup>39</sup> Donald A. Luidens, "National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination," in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled*

hierarchy, a centralized primary or national office, and a democratic structure of boards and agencies, meant to provide resources to local communities, and but more importantly meant to serve as a symbol of the denomination among other institutions.<sup>40</sup> As this model of denominations began to falter after the 1960s, just as the eco-justice movement was beginning, church hierarchies shifted to “regulatory agency” modes, which are primarily concerned with right beliefs and actions rather than building ecumenical community, and which function to “[assert] and [enforce] appropriate conduct and belief on controversial social issues.”<sup>41</sup> Sociologist Nancy Ammerman similarly emphasizes the regulatory power exercised by centralized denominations like The UMC, suggesting that because of their hierarchical organizational structure, such denominations have the power to “enforce unpopular policies.”<sup>42</sup> She points out that denominations function in part both to grant importance to and regulate the religious diversity within their membership. Denominations, she notes, exercise varying amounts of authority over the organizations within the larger structure, with the most hierarchical denominations (like The UMC and

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*Times*, ed. David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 411. Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler used the Presbyterian Church USA as a case study for their work in Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Luidens, "National Engagement with Localism," 411-12.

<sup>41</sup> Drawing on the work of theologian Craig Dykstra and historian James Hudnut-Beumler, Luidens connects the faltering corporate denominational model to the decline in expansionist visions of Christianity, which in turn are linked to a growing awareness of Christianity's complicity with "Western colonial chauvinism." *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>42</sup> Ammerman gives the example of the larger denomination enforcing some practices for racial justice practices on resistant parts of the denomination during the U.S. Civil Rights movement. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Denominations, Congregations, and Special Purpose Groups," in *Handbook of Religion and Society*, ed. David Yamane, *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (New York: Springer, 2016), 144.

the Roman Catholic Church) and the most congregational traditions (like the United Church of Christ) all negotiating how to monitor and regulate the actions of intra-denominational bodies.<sup>43</sup>

Although Luidens writes to address the “regulatory” model in the context of the Presbyterian Church (USA), his argument applies well to The UMC. The regulatory mode in The UMC, for example, has taken form in decades of conflicts over LGBTQ+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage. The regulatory agency mode also functions in the denomination, however, through polity statements and legislative actions meant to instruct both church and secular institutions on just and ethical behavior, such as through its resolutions related to environmentalism. As the national church offices in the U.S. began to shrink in the mid to late twentieth century, Luidens contends, denominations began to turn their attention to resourcing local congregations as their primary mission, signaling a diminished national presence and voice.<sup>44</sup>

As a struggle emerges between the patterns of centralization that Luidens and Ammerman describe, and a push by some for the decentralization that focuses more on local congregations, a crisis of authority takes hold. Many traditional mainline churches, like The UMC, remain firmly centralized, even while they seek to support local congregations and grassroot efforts. Sociologist David A. Roozen and practical theologian James R. Nieman contend that national church offices can become disconnected from the everyday congregant. Staff at denominational agencies and organizational bodies, they argue, are usually only accountable to the “grassroots” of a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>44</sup> Luidens, "National Engagement with Localism," 433.

denomination through governing bodies (like the General Conference in The UMC). They conclude, “Given the relative power of national staff in comparison to the national assembly, the ability of the grass roots to hold national staff accountable is episodic and arduous at best.”<sup>45</sup> Groups like The Institute on Religion and Democracy, which I described in Chapter 2, take advantage of the perceived disconnect between denominational offices and local congregations. The IRD, for example, has worked to sow seeds of distrust between local congregations and The UMC’s board and agency staff, frequently targeting agencies like GBCS for being disconnected from the beliefs of everyday United Methodists, making it more difficult for the agencies to carry out their mandates.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the seeming divide between the hierarchy of a denomination and the grassroots, the assets of the church institution give it the ability to support social change in certain circumstances. Sociologists Mayer Zald and John McCarthy write about the contributions of religious groups to social movements, saying that religious groups can provide movements with financial support, staffing support, and organizational skillsets,

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<sup>45</sup> David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, eds., *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and denominational structures in unsettled times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 11. Despite Roozen and Nieman’s concern for lack of accountability for national denominational staff, I found denominational staff to be extremely concerned with trying to heighten, not lessen connections between their work and local congregations during my own experience as a board member with GBCS (2000-2008, 2012-2016). However, Roozen and Nieman rightly point out the few formal, official channels available for local grassroots efforts to monitor and influence denominational offices, leading to a lack of trust which in turn can heighten the push for decentralization that Couture describes above.

<sup>46</sup> In a 2025 article, for example, The IRD’s blog calls for The UMC to “Dismantle denominational institutionalism by abolishing most general boards and agencies.” “United Methodism, Mainline Protestantism, Christian Faith - Is There Hope,” Juicy Ecumenism, The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Blog, 2025, accessed 19 February, 20206, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2025/02/13/united-methodism-mainline-protestantism-christian-faith-is-there-hope/Case>, .

deploying the existing structures and hierarchies of religious bodies.<sup>47</sup> They point out that when the leading body in hierarchical denominations commits to social action, it has significant weight in “committing the constituents.”<sup>48</sup> Although they acknowledge the possibility of “central authority” religious groups taking leadership in social movements, (they cite the Catholic Church and the Pro-Life abortion movement as an example), however, they insist that congregational denominations give local churches more ability to support social movements, giving communities more ability to quickly respond to emerging issues.<sup>49</sup> Applying their theory to The UMC, certainly the denomination can be hampered by its inability to speak officially as a body outside of General Conference sessions every four years. As sociologist James Rutland Wood asks, “Where is power centered in the interim” between General Conference sessions in The UMC.<sup>50</sup> When the issues pressed by social movements require more immediate responses, The UMC has avenues through which it can take action: the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), for example, can speak and act within the framework of existing Social Principles that might be interpreted to apply to an emerging issue. The denomination’s boards and agencies hold power between sessions, seeking to fill the need for quick

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<sup>47</sup> Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, "Religious Groups as Crucibles of Social Movements," in *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 1987), 70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> James Rutland Wood, "Leadership, Identity, and Mission in a Changing United Methodist Church," in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and denominational structures in unsettled times*, ed. David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 536.

responsiveness to newly unfolding issues, and thus they are often a target for structural change, as groups and individuals seek to access or limit agency power.<sup>51</sup>

Zald and McCarthy also address how support of social movements engenders conflict within denominations. Churches can develop “differentiated agencies,” which, unlike divisions of a corporation, have complicated relationships to the larger denomination. The relative autonomy of these “differentiated agencies” can be a source of conflict in the church. Though they do not employ the term “caucus,” their description of the relationship between these small intrachurch groups and the larger denomination mirrors both official and “unofficial” caucuses within The UMC. Resonating with Zald and McCarthy, sociologist Steven M. Tipton suggests that the emergence of freestanding religious groups that do not officially fold into a denomination’s hierarchy pose challenges to mainline churches.<sup>52</sup> The proliferation of these kinds of religious groups dilutes the authority of mainline denominations, hampering the ability of the latter to present themselves as “the Church.”<sup>53</sup> Zald and McCarthy identify “insurgency and heresy” as another source of conflict. Eventually, “when a fairly large and open insurrection meets opposition,” the opposition group may leave and form a new denomination.<sup>54</sup> As I have described already, The UMC has experienced significant opposition to church policies within the denomination around LGBTQ+ inclusion,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Tipton names both conservative religious groups like the Christian Coalition or Focus on the Family and mainline groups like the Interfaith Alliance as examples of parachurch groups with a political focus, noting that such groups are often growing much faster than denominational churches. Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>54</sup> Zald and McCarthy, "Religious Groups as Crucibles of Social Movements," 85-87.

eventually leading to the schism of the denomination and the formation of the Global Methodist Church in 2022. Decades of deep theological and ethical conflict over queer inclusion in the church took considerable time, financial and emotional resources, and personnel energy. I also outlined efforts from conservative groups to undermine the environmental movement through agency board members and through delegates elected to General Conference, who tried to create an anti-climate change narrative within the denomination. While I expand on the role of caucus groups below, here I emphasize that a potential unintended result to denominational power is the emergence of divisions within the body that can weaken the institution, but also spur change.

Large mainline denominational institutions that wield far-ranging authority can validate and resource movements, or suppress efforts for change, insisting on the status quo, invoking God’s blessing on either approach. Most mainline Protestant churches express at least some support for social justice concerns. Yet, argues Tipton, they are torn between two ways of being church, the public church and the religious lobby. The public (mainline Protestant) church focuses on its national offices, its ecumenical connections in organizations like the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC). Grassroots organizing for social change is the work of the religious lobby. Denominations (like The UMC) tend toward the model of public church, Tipton says, but work with grassroots lobbying efforts when the public church role proves ineffectual for “moral advocacy.”<sup>55</sup> Tipton champions the need both for advocacy that is conducted by the “national denomination as a whole” and grassroots organizing at the local level. “Public policy can contribute to solving many problems,” he says, “but it

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<sup>55</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 44-45.

can't do everything, and it can't be effective without the larger process of faithful civic participation."<sup>56</sup> Tipton's words certainly ring true for The UMC. Denominational polity alone does not create enduring societal change. Instead, initiatives that are both supported by agencies like GBCS *and* championed by caucus groups that are often more connected to grassroots leaders seem best able to effect meaningful transformation.

While Tipton seems optimistic that the church can choose a meaningful path of public witness, ethicist Jenkins is more skeptical. He critiques the social advocacy of many churches, calling out their "inert dullness." Churches have been "laggard and dim," mainly *thinking* about social problems without meaningfully addressing them. "What passes for 'prophetic' in North American churches often means showing up in vestments at rallies organized by others," Jenkins quips.<sup>57</sup> Weaving Bourdieu's perspective with that of sociologist Ann Swidler, Jenkins says that faith communities should focus on using the cultural toolkit of stories and rituals in innovative ways, rather than trying (ineffectively) to reconstruct entire worldviews.<sup>58</sup> Paz Artaza-Regan's account of an appeal to the biblical Noah's Ark narrative to support the Endangered Species Act is an example of a creative use of a story grounded in a common Christian identity across the theological spectrum that did not require any worldview shifting to garner endorsements. Instead, the campaign mined an existing story to connect to eco-justice goals. I turn now to address Jenkins' challenging words, considering the place of theoethical foundations of justice work.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>57</sup> Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

## Do Theology and Ethics Matter?

In her work *Public Church: For the Life of the World*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes about the barriers to churches carrying out public social witness in ways that align with the churches' stated values. Writing for a Lutheran audience, Moe-Lobeda asks,

How is it that a tradition so theologically rich in the call “to love neighbor as self,” and so practically rich in embodying that love corporately through service ministries, rarely has forged ways of challenging social structural sources of unnecessary human suffering and offering alternatives? How is it that efforts to “strive for peace and justice” through public policy advocacy, resisting systemic injustice, and advocating systemic change have been greeted, at times, with suspicion?<sup>59</sup>

Moe-Lobeda's question is also a question this chapter explores, adjusted for an eco-justice inquiry: If the eco-justice movement explicitly expresses non-anthropocentric values, and The UMC, in its Social Principles, expresses at least some commitment to non-anthropocentric values, as demonstrated in the case study in Chapter 2, then why does the denomination's environmental advocacy continue to center the human and reinforce anthropocentric perspectives?

In an essay originally given as a lecture to the UMC agency the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) in 2010, theologian Henrik Pieterse critiques The UMC for a lack of clear and consistent theology, opposing those who insist church decline is because The UMC's structure is too bloated and hierarchical. Pieterse draws on the work of theologian and church historian Russell E. Richey to attribute denominational

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<sup>59</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church: For the Life of the World*, Lutheran Voices, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 41-42.

“malaise” to a lack of theological clarity and unwillingness by the denomination to make clear and bold policy decisions over the past several decades.<sup>60</sup> Church hierarchies are “embodied theology,” he argues, expressions of the theological self-understanding of a denomination. Church bureaucracy is not value-neutral, but rather is tied up with a church’s stated mission. Thus, a denomination should have a clearly articulated theology and ecclesiology, Pieterse urges. He writes:

The chief contribution of a theological perspective, I suggest, is to articulate the crucial link between denominational structure and denominational identity, a link that purely corporate analyses ... often miss. Treating churchly structures or bureaucracy as embodied ecclesial practices allows us to see how, for good or ill, structure and identity mutually shape and reflect each other; how, therefore, unilateral organizational efforts at aligning or rightsizing denominational structures can dramatically alter, often unintentionally, central convictions at the heart of our identity as church; and, positively, how linking practice and identity in this way might offer important insights for profound denominational renewal<sup>61</sup>

For Pieterse, a denomination’s theology should support its structure and bureaucracy unashamedly, but thoughtfully and clearly. Of course, Pieterse does not envision a theology that justifies unchecked power; he speaks about a theology of the church institution that emphasizes discipleship, nurture, hospitality, and love.<sup>62</sup> A grounded theology is an integral piece of a church structure that supports the church in practice, and prevents the bureaucracy from becoming something that suppresses mission and ministry.

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<sup>60</sup> Pieterse, "In Praise of Bureaucracy," 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In The UMC, for example, the Social Principles are intended to be theoethical statements that guide the denomination in its justice-seeking practices at all levels.<sup>63</sup>

While Pieterse proffers a theology of the institution, Presbyterian practical theologian Jennifer R. Ayres attends more to the theology of the social movements working within or alongside religious groups. She asks *how* and *why* religious people participate in social change movements. “How does religion influence social movements ... and how does participation in social movements in turn influence religion?” she wonders.<sup>64</sup> For Ayres, theology must be a core part of social witness practice.<sup>65</sup> Social movements can be sources of existing or emerging “collective social visions,” Ayres writes, “one of the few places where we can see people working out new moral ... sensibilities,” where people develop “*theological* self-understandings.”<sup>66</sup>

Religious social movements are not detached from their denominational affiliations, however. Ayres points out that the practice of social witness (a term drawn from Presbyterian theology that Ayres uses to describe faith-based social justice advocacy) is deeply integrated with the institutional contexts from which its participants come.<sup>67</sup> Those participating in social witness actions are shaped by their religious

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<sup>63</sup> The Social Principles lack, however, explicitly anti-anthropocentric commitments, giving little attention to nonhuman animals. Mindful of Jenkins’ critique of theological posturing, I do not suggest that anti-anthropocentric Social Principles could *create* a denomination that better centers nonhuman animals. I do believe, however, that a denomination’s stated theoethical commitments guide and support a denomination’s social justice practices.

<sup>64</sup> Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>67</sup> Sociologist abigail mohaupt, also drawing on Ayres, defines social witness simply as “the living out of religious identity in the public square.” mohaupt, “Where Your Treasure Is: Orchestrating a

backgrounds, their denominational identities. Activists in turn shape each other, shape their denominations, are shaped by ecumenical institutions and national offices with whom they interact.<sup>68</sup> Building on the theories of sociologist James Jasper, Ayres describes participation in social movements as an activity that helps develop moral virtue, that gives meaning to the lives of those who participate in activist endeavors, regardless of whether or not such activity is “effective” in achieving articulated movement goals.<sup>69</sup> Social movements “form a nexus where participants work out new moral, emotional, cognitive, and *theological* self-understandings,” Ayres writes.<sup>70</sup> The actions of eco-justice advocates, then, are theoethical expressions that draw on activists’ denominational foundations. Formed by the moral, ethical, and theological claims of their mainline Protestant traditions, leaders in the eco-justice movement operate from within a longstanding tradition of engagement with social issues. Like Pieterse and Ayres, I affirm the importance of the theoethical foundations that embolden social justice activism, even while I see the shortcomings of a theological framework that has not made adequate space for the moral worth of each animal life.

Willis Jenkins, though, questions whether a clear theology needs to be of *first* importance when working for change. The church claiming to advocate for change gets lost in the often-fruitless task of seeking to impact theological understanding as a primary goal, he says. Jenkins argues for a pragmatic strategy to work for eco-justice issues,

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Theological Social Movement on Climate Change, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and Divestment from Fossil Fuels," 35. Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move*, 59-60.

<sup>68</sup> Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move*, 59-60.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, emphasis in original.

insisting that the impact of Christian ethics “tends to drift away from concrete problems and communities when it assumes that social change *begins* by changing worldviews, and when it considers the church as a kind of culture with its own worldview.”<sup>71</sup> When the work of social justice gets caught up in the theoretical and theological maneuvering and virtue signaling of church institutions, inaction may be the result. Jenkins is not declaring that theology is not important to social action.<sup>72</sup> Rather, he worries that an “overdetermining” theology of the church transforms the church as agent of cultural reform into “an inert institution of cultural sanction.”<sup>73</sup> Jenkins questions the efficacy of church pronouncements of theological and social values on issues: “The least interesting part of a community’s response is often what its authorized spokespersons say their beliefs mean for a problem,” he declares.<sup>74</sup> Moe-Lobeda similarly notes that while the institutional church frequently (and sincerely) talks about justice, which sounds “right,” the church fails to describe what it means by justice, making “justice-speak” ineffective.<sup>75</sup> As I have suggested in the case of the eco-justice movement, theoethical framing *statements* claiming nonanthropocentric values have not always been reflected in *practice*. However, while I agree with Jenkins and Moe-Lobeda that theological statements are not compelling without a lived expression of those statements, I see theoethical frameworks as enabling and supporting theoethical praxis. Indeed, Jenkins

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<sup>71</sup> Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 68, emphasis mine.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 179.

acknowledges, that the primary structures of religious and cultural life are ingrained in society over centuries, and that “supply[ing] a theological picture of reality helps agents rightly interpret new social relations.”<sup>76</sup>

Though Pieterse, Moe-Lobeda, and Ayres approach the role of theoethical claims of institutions from their own sometimes divergent perspectives, each sees the theological and ethical work of denominations and social movements as an essential factor in lasting social change. Jenkins adds a helpful corrective, cautioning against theological reflection that stymies action, insisting that perfected theology that is disconnected from social praxis is useless. When a movement such as the eco-justice movement is unclear about its theology or inconsistent in embodying its theoethical claims, the movement’s efforts for change can languish. Similarly, when the denominational institution lacks a guiding theological framework for their commitments to justice work, the hierarchy of the church and its regulatory polity can overwhelm and suppress meaningful praxis.<sup>77</sup> Without losing sight of Jenkins’ warnings, I find Pieterse, Moe-Lobeda, and Ayres compelling in their call for clarity and consistency in a movement’s theoethical principles.

### United Methodist, United Methodists, and Social Change

In Chapter 2, I offered a detailed case study of the eco-justice movement in the United Methodist context. Now, shifting to a deeper analysis of the United Methodist

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<sup>76</sup> Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 80-81.

<sup>77</sup> In Chapter 5, after an exploration of the animal rights movement and its relationship to some strains of environmentalism, I will examine ways in which ecofeminist ethics can contribute to a more consistent, and thus effective, theoethical framework for a renewed, non-anthropocentric eco-justice movement.

context, I examine both the guiding theological framework of the denomination and some of the particularities of United Methodist organizational identity that shape the church's social witness. With United Methodist theologians and historians like Steven Tipton, Russell Richey, and Darryl Stephens serving as interlocutors, I explore aspects of Wesleyan theology and Methodist polity that influence the eco-justice movement, and social change more broadly. Though the previous section addressed wide patterns across mainline Protestantism, I engage here in a highly focused inquiry into United Methodism and social movements.

As discussed above, Pieterse advocates for a clear denominational theology that supports its organizational structure. In his essay, "In Praise of Bureaucracy," he addresses the ambivalence of UMC members about the structures, hierarchies, and rules of the denomination. Is the bureaucracy of The UMC more of a benefit or an encumbrance to the mission of the denomination? Members cannot decide, he notes, debating the question from various angles over the years.<sup>78</sup> Yet, the thoughtful reflection on denominational bureaucracy is essential, Pieterse insists, because the structures of The UMC "are visible enactments of the church's ecclesial self-understanding, concrete expressions of our ecclesiology in practice."<sup>79</sup> In fact, even the conflicted feelings about bureaucracy are part of The UMC's denominational identity, says Richey. Denominational conflict is "generative of Methodist self-understanding," inducing a complex Wesleyan identity and "prodding" The UMC to shift and change.<sup>80</sup> United

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<sup>78</sup> Pieterse, "In Praise of Bureaucracy," 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historic Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 48.

Methodists carve out their collective identity through long decades of debate and even division, testing the breadth of the denomination.

In his book *Public Pulpits*, Tipton turns to Jaydee Hanson, introduced in Chapter 1, as a rich source of knowledge about the inner workings of The UMC.<sup>81</sup> In their conversation together, Hanson suggests that United Methodism’s ecclesiology strongly shapes the way it engages in public policy advocacy, prompting The UMC “to take crucial stands on key moral issues.”<sup>82</sup> Hanson likens The UMC to the Roman Catholic Church in terms of its deep integration of personal and social holiness – connecting a commitment to personal faith development with a responsibility for public activism. Hanson also directly addresses UMC bureaucracy, sharing that The UMC has tried to become less hierarchical and more democratic in its leadership style since its 1968 union. Hanson views the result of the denomination’s self-limiting attempt as making advocacy work “messier” than in a denomination where an unabashedly strong hierarchy can choose to focus intensely on a single issue with a single voice.<sup>83</sup>

For Hanson, rather than viewing The UMC’s global structure and official decision-making that can only come every four years at General Conference as a hinderance, he instead sees it as a strength. The denomination is bound to its slow moving but global governance, directed “by our board members and bishops, with all their different views. Still, that’s where the real influence we have comes from,” Hanson

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<sup>81</sup> Insights from my own interview with Hanson, which focused primarily on the eco-justice movement, are found throughout this work. I include Tipton’s interview with Hanson for its helpful insights on the broader issues of institutional and denominational change.

<sup>82</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 236.

<sup>83</sup> Hanson, as interviewed by *ibid.*

claims. “We [denominational staffers] speak for the [whole] church, not just for its Washington office, or a handful of its most liberal leaders.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Tipton reports that leaders in the UMC see themselves as more obligated than their counterparts in the advocacy offices of other denominations to carry out their denomination’s directives. It is challenging in The UMC to act unilaterally – the hierarchy must give approval for many actions.<sup>85</sup> While the institution might have immense power to maintain the status quo, the hierarchy also protects against groups that would seek to co-opt the denomination for their own purposes, as seen, for example, in the regular struggles by GBCS staffers against the tactics and influence of the IRD.

Others are more critical of UMC bureaucracy. Richey simultaneously declares The UMC to have a “polity suffocating from overstructure” *and* a collapsing connectional structure that is drifting toward congregationalism in ways he finds problematic.<sup>86</sup> Richey describes a “bureaucratized polity” that appears most egregiously in the existence of “boards and agencies in far-off places running up the dollars for every meeting to concoct policy with which you and I disagree, to issue it in our name, to lavish our contributed dollars upon it, and then to insist we act in solidarity.”<sup>87</sup> The UMC has a complex decision-making structure, with control consolidated to what he describes as “small elites.” The bureaucracy is “a Methodist signature,” one found in variation across U.S. mainline denominations, but is now often viewed as a burden to carrying out the

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<sup>84</sup> Hanson, as interviewed by *ibid.*, 237.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-38.

<sup>86</sup> Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism*, 236.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

church's mission at best and a way to consolidate power to a small, out-of-touch group at worst.<sup>88</sup> Despite his deep commitment to The UMC, reflecting on his decades of work in the denomination leaves Richey worrying that the bureaucracy of the denomination is one of many "erected walls that stand between us and the gospel" serving to "entrap Methodism."<sup>89</sup> Activists within the denomination recount experiences with the kinds of walls Richey describes. I interviewed Pat Watkins, a retired clergyperson and staff member at the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), and founder of the EarthKeepers ministry, a training program that supports U.S. United Methodists in becoming environmental leaders in the local communities.<sup>90</sup> Watkins expounded on both a sense of collaboration made possible by support from UMC denominational structures to support his vision for the EarthKeepers ministry, and a sense of frustration with the denomination's need to use its power to hold tight control over the program.<sup>91</sup> "GBGM seems to have this need to have some ownership over everything [the agency] does. I developed the EarthKeepers with a vision of GBGM launching the program and then letting Annual Conferences develop the program in their own contexts. But GBGM can't let go. They have to contain and control and have their mark on [the program]." Watkin's

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 237-38.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 236. Despite his strong words, Richey critiques the bureaucracy from the perspective of one deeply enmeshed in the system: Richey served as an ordained elder in The UMC, taught and then served as dean at United Methodist seminaries, was a board member for the General Commission on Archives and History, and led a denominational task force to study the church's episcopal system. In an obituary remembering Richey's contributions to the church, Rex D. Matthews writes, "No one - *no one* - could question [Richey's] ... abiding love for and devotion to the well-being of the church." "Remembering Russ Richey," Emory: Candler School of Theology, 2025, accessed 10 January, 2026, <https://candler.emory.edu/remembering-russ-richey/>.

<sup>90</sup> Watkins, interview. I share additional insights from my interview with Watkins in Chapter 1.

<sup>91</sup> More information about EarthKeepers is available at their website, <https://umcmission.org/work/humanitarian-relief/environmental-sustainability/earthkeepers>.

comments point to how the hierarchy of the denomination both equips and makes possible a ministry like EarthKeepers *and* seems unable to let the ministry carry out its own sense of vision and purpose. The denomination gets in its own way, both wanting to support a dynamic ministry like EarthKeepers, and unable to let it grow more organically.

“The powers” in The UMC, to adopt Elgendy’s parlance, are desirable to many groups within the denominations, however, there is much conflict and controversy related to who within the denomination possesses power, and how they wield that power.

Determining who has the most influence in the process of crafting the social witness of The UMC remains a challenge with layers of answers. Questions about denominational power and authority in The UMC are enmeshed with conflicts over mission and theology, highlighting again the importance of theoethical commitments as a component of denominational change. Wood expands on the long-standing conflict in The UMC over the meaning of biblical authority and its relationship to the church’s mission. Some interpret the Bible to support a focus on individual salvation, which then should be the church’s central mission, while others focus on the biblical call to social justice and social change.<sup>92</sup> The tension between these perspectives, Wood argues, impacts the denomination at every level.<sup>93</sup> Nickell likewise addresses the theological breadth of The UMC, noting that the denomination’s tolerance for theological diversity has changed over

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<sup>92</sup> Wood, "Leadership, Identity, and Mission," 539.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 540. Wood recounts, for example, the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA)’s concerns that the 1996 adoption of The UMC’s mission statement at General Conference, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ” would be “too narrowly interpreted,” focusing on limited forms of evangelization. MFSA advocated for additional language, which would clarify that discipleship concerned “world-changing work” that focused on “transforming social structures.” Their proposed language addition did not pass. This demonstrates how even the mission statement of the denomination has been a source of theological division, as diverse groups struggle for power in the system.

time. She writes that The UMC “came into being in an age of transition and allowed for theological diversity and change.”<sup>94</sup> Theological statements in the newly merged denomination’s *Book of Discipline* focused not on confessional statements of faith, but on sharing tools for theological interpretation. For example, the initial statement of “Our Theological Task,” approved in 1972, included the charge to pursue “theological pluralism” that was “inclusive,” broad enough to encompass the theologically liberal and conservative in meaningful ways.<sup>95</sup> The statement explicitly mentioned “black theology, female liberation theology, political and ethnic theologies, third-world theology, and theologies of human rights,” saying that these theologies “agree in their demands for human dignity, true liberty, and genuine community.”<sup>96</sup> The bold embrace of pluralism did not go unchallenged however. The conservative evangelical caucus Good News began working in the late seventies to amend “Our Theological Task,” and in 1988, a new statement was adopted by The UMC replacing “doctrinal pluralism” with “theological diversity,” and adding emphasis on the primacy of scripture and the role of Jesus Christ in salvation.<sup>97</sup>

Despite setbacks, however, the theological language of the Social Principles most often seeks to reflect the efforts of the prophetic movement Nickell describes. Darryl Stephens, in *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church’s Witness*, suggests that the very legislative process of crafting and revising Social Principles

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<sup>94</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 16.

<sup>95</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 77.

<sup>96</sup> The United Methodist Church, *1972 Discipline*, 79-80 .

<sup>97</sup> Yrigoyen Jr, McEllhenney, and Rowe, *United Methodism at Forty*, 52-59.

contributes to their significance, that the process of producing Principles is as important as their implementation. “The Social Principles is not merely a platform for proclaiming the UMC’s social witness. It *is* the witness.”<sup>98</sup> United Methodist history, Stephens notes, does not draw a clear boundary between theological claims and social justice claims.<sup>99</sup> Instead, employing a concept drawn from the writings of Methodist movement founder John Wesley, The UMC has cultivated a concept of “social holiness,” theological grounding that is expressed as social justice action (see footnote).<sup>100</sup> Former GBCS General Secretary Thom White Wolf Fassett, in an interview with Steven Tipton, expands on how The UMC’s theological commitments set it apart from other groups working for justice. He contends that it is the foundation of faith that motivates social action among United Methodists, at least United Methodists working in connection with GBCS. Referring to the location of the United Methodist Building (home of GBCS’s office) on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, right across the street from office buildings of members of Congress, Fassett said, “What distinguishes us in the city on this side of the street [in the United Methodist Building] from those sitting on that side of the street [in Congress office buildings] is that here the principles of faith come first, and the action comes second. Over there, the action comes first, and only God knows the point where

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<sup>98</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 199-200.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>100</sup> The phrase “social holiness” is used just once by Wesley, but the concept, extrapolated from his writings, is a hallmark of Methodist theology, meaning that holiness does not come from personal devotional practices in isolation, but from active love of neighbor. See Field, David N. "Holiness, social justice and the mission of the church: John Wesley’s insights in contemporary context," *Holiness. A Journal of Wesley House Cambridge* 1, no. 2 (2015): 177-198 for a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of social holiness.

faith comes in.”<sup>101</sup> The mission of The UMC, contentious as its wording may be among various factions of the denomination, is expressed in social justice action, a Wesleyan practice of social holiness.

Conferencing is another important hallmark of United Methodist ecclesiology.<sup>102</sup> Despite critiques of UMC hierarchy and its slow process of decision-making, Stephens names conferencing (which is United Methodist language for General Conference gatherings, but also for smaller regional gatherings throughout the connection to address local issues) as a strength of the denomination, providing a “corrective” opportunity that nurtures the community through accountability.<sup>103</sup> He acknowledges, however, that revising the *Discipline* through General Conference sessions has in some ways “replaced the institutional functions of multiple genres of social witness,” with crafting legislations, a task undertaken by most general boards and agencies, like GBCS, and by regional bodies, congregations, and individuals, taking up much more time and energy than implementing the Social Principles and other social statements of the church in a way that reflects covenantal accountability.<sup>104</sup> During my tenure as a GBCS board member, I estimate that nearly half of the meetings during a quadrennium focused primarily on crafting and revising legislation for General Conference. Although the legislation enabled GBCS’s work, including its eco-justice advocacy, that left only two years of each term to enact eco-justice (or other) priorities. If more time is spent on talking about which social

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<sup>101</sup> Fassett, as quoted by Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 233.

<sup>102</sup> In Chapter 5, I link holy conferencing to ecofeminist praxis, suggesting avenues for deepening the gathering work of conferencing to ask who is included in the relational ways of being of The UMC.

<sup>103</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 53.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

justice positions The UMC will embrace than in actually *acting* to embrace change, then the denomination is not nimble enough to engage in transformative leadership.

In the context of these United Methodist theological and structural particularities, how does the denomination work for, against, or alongside social change movements such as the eco-justice movement? Stephens writes that how denominations respond to and manage social change and evolving ethical sensibilities is as important as the content of a denomination's social justice statements. The "disciplined practices of formulating a prophetic proclamation" in answer to or as drivers of social change serve as a witness of a church's moral compass to the larger world.<sup>105</sup> Stephens makes the case that the Social Principles, especially viewed as amended over time, function as a record of how The UMC navigates social change and forms its moral identity. The principles are a "moral discourse," snapshots of an "ongoing conversation" captured in time.<sup>106</sup> The changes in the Natural World section of the Social Principles, then, show the evolution of the denomination's commitment to eco-justice over time – *and* they show the denomination's relative lack of "ongoing conversation" about animals.

Stephens points out that it is the only part of the *Discipline* that is published regularly as its own freestanding document.<sup>107</sup> The implication is that the Social Principles are sufficient unto themselves as a clear communication of UMC social policy, and indeed, congregations often undertake studies of the "Social Principles" text on its own. In sharp contrast to Jenkins's criticism of what he sees as ineffective theological

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 29.

grandstanding, Stephens contends that official denominational statements are influential and important. Because official statements “interact in surprising and irregular ways” with the practices of denomination members, Stephens concludes that “the function of official denominational statements is multivalent – as summary of belief, goad to action, and arena for contestation.”<sup>108</sup> For The UMC, the Social Principles are not just a way to share United Methodist perspectives. Rather the Social Principles *are* the social witness of the church; they are “document, discourse, and practice,” representing the inseparability in Methodism of the church and the world, of “rights” and theology.<sup>109</sup> Hence they are part of the focus of this dissertation’s analysis. The emphasis Stephens places on the crafting of the Social Principles as a form of social witness is reflected in the years-long revision process for the Social Principles I described in Chapter 2. The changes to The UMC’s social statements on environmental concerns, for example, both reflect years of advocacy within and on behalf of the denomination to make environmental concerns more central in The UMC’s official positions, *and* the new statements in turn enable a more robust environmental advocacy in the future.

General agencies in The UMC, particularly GBCS with its social witness-focused responsibility to carry out the denomination’s adopted polity, play a critical role in denominational change movements. GBCS occupies a middle space, both directly part of the organizational hierarchy, yet also composed of many (though not all) board members and staffers who are activists working within their roles for social justice causes. This

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<sup>108</sup> Darryl W. Stephens, "From Environmental Stewardship to Environmental Holiness: The Evolution of Methodist Environmental Witness, with a Focus on Climate Change," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 3 (2019): 494.

<sup>109</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 199-200.

dual status of agency personnel – both a part of the institution and a part of change movements – is a resource that enables institutional shifts. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow and John Hyde Evans point out that the effectiveness of denominational agencies in creating change both within and outside the church *depends* on the ability to effectively mobilize clergy and local congregations throughout the denominational network.<sup>110</sup> Roozen strikes a similar tone on the importance of the middle space of denominational staffers. He disagrees with denominational scholars who claim that denominations are declining in part because national leaders are “out of touch” with their constituent segments and needs at the local level. To the contrary, Roozen notes that sometimes national staff (like GBCS staffers) are *more* engaged in advocacy and more committed to carrying out the church’s stated mission.<sup>111</sup> Drawing on the work of sociologist K. Peter Takayama, Roozen suggests that national denominational leadership can carry out its advocacy work with less constraint than grassroots groups like caucuses. This flexibility and freedom can appear to be authoritarian and top-heavy to grassroots groups, while the constraint of smaller resources can make local congregational engagement with social issues seem “overly passive, if not downright resistant” to denominational leadership.<sup>112</sup> The institution has power, influence, and flexibility that amplifies the role of agency staff.

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Wuthnow and John Hyde Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God: faith-based activism and the public role of mainline Protestantism* (University of California Press, 2002), 15-16.

<sup>111</sup> David A. Roozen, "National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective," in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 595.

<sup>112</sup> Luidens, "National Engagement with Localism," 596.

GBCS has long had one of the largest agency staffs in The UMC. In Chapter 2, I commented on the ongoing challenge of resourcing eco-justice work with staff and financial commitment from the denomination, but I noted that The UMC has typically devoted more staff time to environmental concerns than other mainline Protestant churches. Tipton also discusses UMC agency staffing and financial support, pointing out that though GBCS has faced budget and staffing reductions over the decades, GBCS still had a significantly larger financial commitment and staff presence in public advocacy work than other mainline denominations at the time of *Public Pulpit*'s publication in 2008, signifying at least in part the commitment of The UMC to social justice advocacy.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, in Tipton's perspective, the large number of staffers in national mainline denominational offices, especially those like GBCS, has not necessarily meant that the denominations have had or can have a bigger impact on national justice issues, since the number of justice issues the churches seek to address has increased exponentially.<sup>114</sup> Large and well-funded national advocacy offices do not automatically equate with (or exclude the possibility of) wide or effective impact on social issues. As I have pointed out in the case of the eco-justice movement, for example, even the attention paid to animals through advocacy related to the Endangered Species Act has been

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<sup>113</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 81-82. It is difficult to assess whether Tipton's claims are still true as of 2026, due to several factors: the drastic financial impact of the schism between The UMC and the Global Methodist Church, the difference between The UMC's global funding scope versus the national identities of other mainline Protestant tradition, and the different budget narrative styles across traditions. The GBCS budget, which represents the primary sources of social justice advocacy funds for The UMC, currently sits at \$5.6 million for the 2025-2028 quadrennium. General Council on Finance and Administration, *The United Methodist Church Budget Handbook 2025-2028*.

<sup>114</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 343.

inconsistent, with other environmental issues taking precedence in the time and attention of agency staff.

Large denominations and other institutions also face what Darryl Stephens describes as “competing internal pressures,” a struggle often revealed in the work of church agencies. Reporting on an interview with Jaydee Hanson, Stephens recounts a conflict Hanson described between GBCS and the denomination’s then-titled General Board of Pensions. GBCS leadership advocated for The UMC to commit to socially responsible investing that avoided supporting businesses providing weapons for war. Initially, the Board of Pensions rejected GBCS’s request, even laughing at the suggestion that the denomination should prioritize socially responsible investments over potentially more lucrative options.<sup>115</sup> Eventually, the denomination did adopt rigorous investment screens, including those connected to climate change – The UMC is a top-ranked institution among investors who focus on mitigating climate impact.<sup>116</sup> As I noted, though, in my interview with Jenny Phillips (detailed in Chapter 2), The UMC’s investment portfolio is still a contentious topic, with divestment from fossil fuels remaining an active debate in the denomination. Stephens likewise underscores that socially responsible investments remain divisive, but he strikes a hopeful tone, contending that divestment from fossil fuels is “but one arena in which Methodists

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<sup>115</sup> Stephens, "From Environmental Stewardship to Environmental Holiness," 476.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 492.

contest and engage each other,” potentially leading to “a more faithful response to creation care and climate stewardship.”<sup>117</sup>

Though GBCS is an official UMC entity, it has also frequently been the target of conservative members and external groups in The UMC, who see GBCS as “too political,” claiming that it is pushing application of the Social Principles to liberal extremes.<sup>118</sup> Former General Secretary Jim Winkler responded to critiques during his tenure, saying, “Sometimes we Christians think our main task is to be nice all the time and to avoid offending anyone.” However, he counters, GBCS is not “the paid court prophet of any government ... [Seeking] justice leads inevitably to political confrontation ... And that’s the sticking point, isn’t it? Political confrontation. That’s where most Christians head for the hills.”<sup>119</sup> In a 2002 column of the former GBCS magazine publication *Christian Social Action*, Winkler wrote, “The Cult of the Majority is a powerful force in The United Methodist Church today ... too many clergy have abdicated their prophetic responsibilities. Too many of our lay people see Christianity as a form of comfort food.”<sup>120</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 2, responding to direct and indirect challenges to GBCS’s work – including challenges directed at The UMC’s eco-justice commitments - from groups like the Institute on Religion and Democracy takes

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 493. See also abigail mohaupt’s extensive work on fossil fuel divestment and social change strategies in mohaupt, “Where Your Treasure Is: Orchestrating a Theological Social Movement on Climate Change, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and Divestment from Fossil Fuels.”

<sup>118</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 92-93. As I have mentioned, I have experienced such criticisms firsthand during my time as a board member at GBCS. During my time on the board, for example, Mark Tooley and other staff from the Institute on Religion and Democracy would regularly attend GBCS board meetings as observers and then publish “exposé” styles newsletter articles to their constituents about the board’s work.

<sup>119</sup> Winkler as cited in *ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>120</sup> Jim Winkler, “Publisher's Column,” *Christian Social Action* January-February (2002).

considerable time and attention, directing limited denominational resources away from advocacy and activism.

One final aspect of UMC polity and practice is notable in light of the larger focus of this dissertation, and in connection with the examination of the animal rights movement I turn to in the next chapter. Mainline US churches make extensive use of “rights” language in their social justice statements, an avenue of considerable overlap between ecclesial and secular approaches to advocacy work. Protecting the rights that should be guaranteed to all people, but are denied to certain minoritized groups, is essential, writes Tipton, and a primary focus of the church’s advocacy work.<sup>121</sup> Rights language, as Tipton sees it, aids in communicating a “minimum” level, which denominations then connect to love of God and neighbor in action. Rights language used by denominations in the United States are also enmeshed with the US model of government and its emphasis on individuals’ rights.<sup>122</sup>

Looking at The UMC’s Social Principles, Darryl Stephens likewise observes a focus on rights language: the word “rights” occurred more than eighty times in the 2012 version of the Social Principles he studied, and at least ten sections deal with the rights of different marginalized groups like children, immigrants, or people with disabilities. Yet, Stephens notes, more theological and Wesleyan language like “grace” occurs much less frequently, just a handful of times.<sup>123</sup> In the revised Social Principles of 2020/2024,

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<sup>121</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 253.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>123</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 74, 80.

“rights” occurs just shy of eighty times, while “grace” occurs eight times.<sup>124</sup> Stephens takes his analysis a step further, showing with a detailed comparison chart the similarities in rights language between the 2012 version of the Social Principles, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (both documents supported by the United Nations and signed by member nations).<sup>125</sup> Both the overlaps in topics addressed and the style of language employed by the three documents is substantial, making evident how grounded in the concept of rights the Social Principles are. Despite the clear importance of rights language to the Social Principles, Stephens notes, just one statement in the 2012 edition of the principles connects the concept of rights with theological centering, and even then, not explicitly: The Prologue declares that “all person [are] equally valuable in the sight of God.”<sup>126</sup> The Revised Social Principles, however, show a shift. As I mentioned in Chapter 2 in my interview with Mark Davies, strengthening the theological core of the Social Principles was a top priority for the writing team. The strengthening is evident: unlike the 2012 Social Principles, the new revisions include many instances of speaking about rights couched in theological and biblical imagery.

The strong presence of rights language in United Methodist social justice statements, especially when presented in the context of a more grounded theological context, presents possibilities for connection with the animal rights movement and

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<sup>124</sup> The United Methodist Church, *United Methodist Social Principles*. Notably, of the nearly eighty occurrences of the word “right,” only two appear in the section on the Community of All Creation, and those occurrences relate to food justice and human rights related to food access.

<sup>125</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 82-92.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

environmental movements that focus on the rights of nature. Drawing on both the rhetorical approach of rights language, and the affinity of The UMC for crafting compelling and lasting social advocacy statements, future legislation for General Conference aiming at building less human-centered theology could focus on the rights of nonhuman creation.

### The Power of Caucuses and Individual Activism

In Chapter 2, I discussed the impact of individuals and groups like caucuses on denominational polity around eco-justice concerns, showing that even though the denomination and its agencies often dominated the legislative process, there were still several instances of individuals or groups of activists making their mark on the polity and practice of The UMC's eco-justice movement. Here, I expand support for my argument with a scholarly examination of the role of individuals and caucus groups in social change movements.

Caucuses are an integral part of United Methodism. Reflecting on his own experiences at the 1972 General Conference, historian Kenneth E. Rowe recounts a conversation with a bishop who was complaining about "caucuses, quotas, and politics," calling them new and "un-Methodist." Rowe, however argues both that Methodism *was itself* a caucus within the revivalism movements of the 1700s *and* that as soon as Methodism became its own entity, it immediately "spawned caucuses," with rival groups jockeying for their theological positions in the forming denomination.<sup>127</sup> He contends that caucusing – establishing an avenue for protest and reform within the institutional

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<sup>127</sup> Rowe, "How Do Caucuses Contribute to Connection," 242.

structure – is part of the character of Methodism, as he connects Methodist figures like Wesley, Francis Asbury, and United Brethren leader Jacob Otterbein to caucus-like or caucus-adjacent activity.<sup>128</sup>

The UMC saw a sizable expansion of caucus groups beginning in the 1960s, mirroring the tensions in the larger society, as the conflicts between the authoritarian and “democratic” segments of the denomination clashed. Racial/ethnic groups like the Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR) and the Metodistas Asociados Representando la Causa Hispano (MARCHA) formed in this season, as did the Affirmation caucus supporting gay and lesbian rights, and the conservative evangelical caucus Good News. “The caucus spirit,” Rowe writes, “burst out all across the church.”<sup>129</sup>

Rowe asserts that caucuses are important contributors to social transformation in The UMC. Though caucuses have often been counted as a “burden” in the historical record Rowe traces, Rowe insists that they offer a needed counterpoint to “connectional authority,” functioning to refocus the church’s mission and advocate for a just distribution of power. “Every generation of [United Methodism] has had its . . . cantankerous caucuses, who would not be put down by episcopal authority or by majority vote.”<sup>130</sup> Caucuses and other activist groups make meaningful contributions toward social change in the organizations to which they connect and to the issues on which they focus their efforts.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 242-43.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 255-56.

In United Methodism, caucuses are sometimes able to force General Conference (and thus the institution of The UMC) to address issues it would rather ignore. Although some have found caucus groups to be divisive, working against church unity, Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe consider them to be “a catalyst forcing the church to deal with critical issues in its life and ministry.”<sup>131</sup> Caucuses “give visibility and voice” to many groups within The UMC, and through their organizational strategies are able to “put pressure on General Conference delegates to vote the way the caucuses want them to vote.”<sup>132</sup> On the flip side, Nickell argues that pressure from dissenting voices on justice issues can provide an excuse for the denomination. The institution can use the excuse of “[deferring] to resistant members” who are reluctant to concede to the pressures of a social movement.<sup>133</sup> Still, the power of the caucus in the process of social change is demonstrated again, although this time in an inverse manner.

Caucuses and other advocacy groups can give precise attention to topics that denominations cannot always address. Tipton links the emergence of single-issue para-denominational groups to the stark reality that denominations cannot give in-depth attention to every social justice issue that needs a response from the faith community.<sup>134</sup> Justice issues that the church should address will fall through the cracks, and some single-issue organizations increasingly are working to fill in the gaps. The “proliferation of issues and diversification of public argument over them ... has challenged ... the

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<sup>131</sup> Yrigoyen Jr, McEllhenney, and Rowe, *United Methodism at Forty*, 36.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>133</sup> Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, 165.

<sup>134</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 273.

coherence of [denominations'] own moral dialogue and public advocacy,” Tipton claims, leaving space for focused groups to step in to advocate on their issues of choice.<sup>135</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, denominations sometimes intentionally partner with caucus groups and other single-issue organizations in order to better accomplish the institution’s justice goals.

Individuals and groups have moral power, and can provide an important witness within denominations, and holding the bureaucracy accountable. Moe-Lobeda underscores the importance of what she calls individual and collective agency, insisting that while “structural injustice transcends individual agency,” collective agency, fueled by individual agency, can indeed unravel structural evil.<sup>136</sup> Being a part of collective activism is life-giving for members of advocacy groups. Shaping the social witness of a whole denomination, Stephens argues, is a way for individuals to achieve belonging - “inclusion through political participation.” Individuals can help shape social witness through the groups to which they belong, an act which reaffirms an individual’s place in the larger group. “It is as if each person is thinking, ‘my group’s words represent my group, which represents me.’ To have words included in the *Discipline* is to be included in the institution,” Stephens writes.<sup>137</sup> Caucus groups are a means of institutional belonging even while seeking change in the institution. Denominational scholar and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 343. Although Tipton characterizes the IRD differently than he does denominational caucus groups, Tipton also spends considerable time addressing the work of the IRD to counteract what the IRD describes as the “leftists politics” of The UMC (and other mainline Protestant denominations), noting that groups like the IRD primarily work to *prevent* UMC boards and agencies from engaging in certain justice-seeking initiatives. See especially Chapters 5 and 6 in *Public Pulpits*.

<sup>136</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 256.

<sup>137</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 67.

political scientist Laura R. Olson also comments on the power of the collective, both in enacting change and in helping individuals derive meaning and belonging from collective action. Drawing on helpful principles from social psychological perspectives on social movements, she writes that the term “collective identity” describes how individual identity becomes intertwined with group identity by those participating together in social change movements. “Movement solidarity” describes how individuals “develop and maintain loyalty to” the social movement groups of which they are a part.<sup>138</sup> Caucus groups, for instance, can function as the carrier of social movements within The UMC.

Moe-Lobeda outlines several ways individuals and small groups impact institutional change: Individuals can set the tone of a “moral climate,” creating openings for policy shifts and wider change. They also can reveal the presence of alternate perspectives and practices. Individuals can shape policy by practicing resistance in their everyday lives.<sup>139</sup> Like Moe-Lobeda and Olson, Stephens also suggests that individual advocacy thrives in the context of collective work. He argues that it is through participation in groups like caucuses that individuals are most likely to make an impact on the denomination. Groups, rather than individuals, are more likely to get legislation passed at General Conference, he argues. Usually, “to have a significant voice in [the legislative process of General Conference] often requires belonging to a group that speaks together.”<sup>140</sup> Stephens calls the Social Principles a “register of the legislative

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<sup>138</sup> Laura R. Olson, "Collective Identity and Movement Solidarity among Religious Left Activists in the U.S.," in *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories about Faith and Politics*, ed. Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 99.

<sup>139</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 257.

<sup>140</sup> Stephens, *Methodist Morals: social principles in the public church's witness*, 66.

victories of various caucuses.”<sup>141</sup> For example, although the divestment language submitted to GC 2020/2024 by FossilFreeUMC was referred rather than adopted, as I discussed in Chapter 2, caucus leader Jenny Phillips reported that part of her strategy was to have FossilFreeUMC legislation submitted by as many Annual Conferences and denominational groups as possible to amplify her voice.

While groups have their place in denominational social change, most scholars emphasize the individual’s power through their small group caucus participation. Yet, the individual’s advocacy work is important too. Any individual member of The UMC can petition the General Conference directly to propose changes (some other mainline denominations have a similar polity function). Although petitions endorsed by caucuses, Annual Conferences, or agencies are more likely to succeed, sometimes legislation originating with an individual is eventually adopted by the General Conference, either directly or through subsequent levels of endorsement on its way to General Conference.<sup>142</sup> The power of the individual is a cherished part of denominational governance, even if that avenue of change is more arduous and less typically fruitful than more collaborative or agency-led efforts.<sup>143</sup> As I shared in the case study, in the right

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>142</sup> For example, at the 2020/2024 General Conference, a delegate from the Upper New York Annual Conference, Ian Urriola, submitted legislation titled “Annual Carbon Footprint and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Audit for Local Church,” urging local churches to engage in annual evaluation of their facility’s ecological footprint. General Conference passed the legislation. United Methodist Creation Justice, *What Passed at General Conference, Final Language*, (2024), <https://umcreationjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/702/2024/05/What-passed-at-General-Conference.pdf>.

<sup>143</sup> I offer a vignette as a testament to the “cherished” view of the right of the individual to petition the General Conference. During General Conference 2020/2024, Mark Holland, a UMC clergy person and then Executive Director of the centrist pro-LGBTQ+ inclusion group “Mainstream UMC” sent out a daily update to its email list with news about the legislative committee work of the conference. As a personal aside, while writing about the number of petitions upon which delegates had acted, Holland lamented that individuals were allowed to directly petition the General Conference. He wrote,

circumstances, individual actors who are in the right positions, or who have the right connections can directly impact institutional polity, as did Jenny Phillips and Jeanie Ree Moore.<sup>144</sup> Many church members hold this sense of ability to speak up and make change as a dear right to be protected, even if most also acknowledge that counteracting the will of the institution and its agencies is a difficult endeavor.

As this section has shown, individuals and groups like caucuses can be agents for denominational change. Caucuses and other activists, however, are not *always* the prophets within the institution, as groups like the IRD demonstrate. James Rutland Wood offers a nuanced position, effectively both agreeing with and pushing against the concept

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In my humble opinion, this whole process is a byzantine exercise in futility. According to our beloved Book of Discipline any United Methodist individual, church, district, annual conference, or agency can submit a petition. This is ridiculous. From a process perspective, no legislative body - much less a reputable global body - allows just anyone to clog up their calendar with random ideas. From a practical perspective, petitions with individual names on them fare far worse than those with a reputable group backing them. If a petition gets sent in by your angry Uncle Bob, the chance it gets approved is about 1 in a thousand. (Sadly, this reality has provided little deterrence through the years.) If an annual conference submits a petition, it is about 50/50. If a general agency drafts a petition, the chances are 90% that it passes. If the petition is submitted by the United Women in Faith (aka UMW) it passes at a 99% rate (for real).

Holland's blunt words accurately reflect how much more likely it is for agency-endorsed legislation to be adopted by General Conference, as already mentioned. Nonetheless, Holland reported that newsletter recipients were not pleased with his dismissal of what is a unique hallmark of The UMC legislative process. The day after Holland's personal aside, his next daily email update offered a "clarification." Holland wrote, "Not everyone appreciated my negative view of petitions being open to everyone." Holland remained steadfast in his view that petitions should not come from individual United Methodists, arguing that the resultant high volume of petitions "does not give us the time or energy to do our best work." However, Holland noted that at least one person had called his email "elitist." Mark Holland, 28 April 2024; Mark Holland, 28 April 2024.

<sup>144</sup> Sociologist abigail mohaupt notes that individuals who have nurtured connections and networks are better placed to make an impact on denominational change than those who are truly acting without any support from others. She shares an example from the U.S. civil rights movement, noting a teenager named Claudette Colvin refused to move her seat on an Alabama bus and was arrested about nine months before Rosa Parks was arrested. Parks, though, was an active part of the civil rights movement, and acted within an organized protest strategy. Her protest, then, was more effective than Colvin's solo action. mohaupt, "Where Your Treasure Is: Orchestrating a Theological Social Movement on Climate Change, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and Divestment from Fossil Fuels," 24, fn 29.

of caucuses as prophetic movements. He calls caucuses one potential source of “adaptive change” within The UMC. Caucus members are typically committed UMC members, both part of the institution and working to change it.<sup>145</sup> Caucus advocacy can potentially counteract, balance, *or* reinforce official leadership. Yet, returning to Nickel’s Bourdieu-inspired argument, I cast social justice caucus groups like MFSA and eco-focused groups in the role of prophetic movements that seek to destabilize priestly structures, subverting the status quo of an institution. Disrupting the existing power structure of a global denomination is typically arduous, slow-moving work. Methodist history is rife with examples, however, of social movements not only supported *by* the denomination, but also emerging to reshape the denomination itself. The eco-justice movement has functioned and continues to function in both of these roles, both supported by The UMC, and influencing The UMC to expand its commitment to creation care.

### Environmentalism, Denominations, and Change

Thus far, I have been linking examples from the eco-justice movement to the larger topic of denominational change. I shift now to more directly explore the relationship between denominational change and environmental social movements. How have environmental movements connected to church institutions to work for change? Despite proclaiming teachings to the contrary, Moe-Lobeda says, the church of the Global North “tends to comply with the ways of life that accumulate and consume,”

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<sup>145</sup> Wood, "Leadership, Identity, and Mission," 553-54.

causing ecological harm rather than fighting environmental devastation.<sup>146</sup> The institutional church can contribute to a cultural atmosphere of environmental neglect. Yet, mainline churches can also be powerful sources of environmental activism, especially when they are fueled by the caucus groups and other parachurch organizations operating alongside official denominational channels.

Denominational entities have played an important role in supporting environmentalism, as the case study in Chapter 2 illustrates. Wuthnow and Evans, for example, name environmental advocacy as an issue where mainline denominations have had a big role in impacting national politics, even while the “wider public,” both in churches and in the larger society, does not always recognize denominational contributions.<sup>147</sup> Tipton agrees: although he addresses a wide range of social issues in his work on “public churches” and their social witness, he singles out environmentalism as a topic which has enabled churches to connect theology and practice, positioning churches to act “not as a mass of individuals and interest groups, but as a moral community whose interdependent members will prevail or perish together.”<sup>148</sup> Tipton writes that the “wholeness of creation and its human stewardship” is a core component of the church’s self-understanding that the church is “entrusted by God with the whole of society, not

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<sup>146</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 267.

<sup>147</sup> Wuthnow and Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Tipton, *Public Pulpits*, 404.

only the whole of its members' social lives."<sup>149</sup> The church has a particular task of caring "for the whole of humankind, human nature, and creation itself."<sup>150</sup>

Sociologists Elizabeth Bomberg and Alice Hague see mainline institutions as providers of resources for environmentalism. They discuss the contributions that Christian communities bring to environmental work that are not necessarily available to secular environmental organizations. These resources include shared values, a shared narrative, and symbols and practices that support the shared narrative.<sup>151</sup> They point to the shared values of love for God's creation, a sense of responsibility for caring for creation (derived from scriptures and Christian teachings), and a value for biblically-based justice.<sup>152</sup> Christian environmentalists also articulate a narrative of "hope, healing, and redemption," along with a strong emphasis on working for change over time – looking to the past, working for change now, and casting a vision for an improved future for creation.<sup>153</sup> Sociologists Matthew Immergut and Laurel Kearns similarly focus on resources shared by religious groups, emphasizing their more tangible contributions to "make movement mobilization possible by providing concrete material resources such as money, equipment, space, and congregants to swell the ranks of the concerned."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>151</sup> Elizabeth Bomberg and Alice Hague, "Faith-Based Climate Action in Christian Congregations: Mobilisation and Spiritual Resources," *Local Environment* 23, no. 5 (2018): 587, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2018.1449822>.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 587-88.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 589-90.

<sup>154</sup> Immergut and Kearns, "When Nature Is Rats and Roaches," 188.

Reflecting on her work with the Eco-justice Working Group, former program director (and current executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE)) Cassandra Carmichael described characteristics of denominations who were “truly engaged in justice work” and ready to be resource-providers for social movements. Carmichael said she looked for three factors: First, is the justice issue a named area of focus, a stated priority of the denomination? Second, does the denomination commit to the justice issue with financial support for dedicated staffing? Third, do the individuals hired by the denomination “take the reins and drive,” giving leadership to the movement?<sup>155</sup> The UMC, she thought, met the challenge in all of these areas, through multi-agency prioritization of environmentalism, through staff commitment, and through “really taking on creation care, eco-justice, environmental justice – tracking policy, engaging folks, holding lobby days, educating, and giving briefings.” In both material ways and through the sharing of theoethical narratives that give language to environmental causes, denominations have bolstered ecological justice movements.

Historian Bradford Verter and sociologist Michael Moody suggest the environmental justice movement as the key example of the leadership and resourcing provided by mainline denominations in environmental advocacy. Despite the ways eco-justice might have been used as a “respite” from the demands of anti-racist work, as described in Chapter 1, Verter calls the naming by church groups of environmental racism as a serious justice issue along with detailed plans to combat it “the most important accomplishment of the mainline denominations” in “public dialogue on

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<sup>155</sup> Carmichael, interview.

racism.”<sup>156</sup> Taking a lead on combatting environmental racism, the United Church of Christ, the NCC, and several member denominations (like the UMC) acted in a prophetic rather than a reactive way, declares Verter.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, Moody points to the significance of the “‘discovery’ of ‘environmental racism’” and the development of the environmental justice framework as an important moment in the eco-justice movement, calling it “the clearest example of Protestants having a direct and major impact on secular environmentalism or environmental policy.”<sup>158</sup> Whether acting as overt movement leaders, or as resources support in more background roles, mainline denominations have shaped environmentalism in the U.S. in substantial and enduring ways.

While caucus groups and independent religious environmental groups are important contributors to the movement, the vast resources of mainline denominational hierarchies give significant structural, financial, and connectional support to the effectiveness of institutional environmentalism. Denominations have mobilized their assets to influence not only their own members, but have also been able to serve as contributors to the larger environmental movement, leveraging connections to impact governmental policies. Though the hierarchy and bureaucracy of mainline churches comes with challenges, the assets for the aims of the environmental movement cannot be overlooked. Yet, this dissertation asks, why have those assets not been applied to the aims of the animal rights movement? I explore this question in Chapter 4.

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<sup>156</sup> Verter, "Furthering the Freedom Struggle," 196.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. I discuss the relationship between the eco-justice movement and the environmental justice movement in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>158</sup> Moody, "Caring for Creation," 242.

## Conclusions

During interviews with eco-justice activists and denominational leaders, I asked each person to share a “success story” – where did they see the biggest progress on achieving their goals for environmental advocacy and social change? One response stands out. I spoke with John Hill, former Interim General Secretary at GBCS as his tenure at GBCS was drawing to a close as we spoke – his successor had already been named. His sense of accomplishment was muted. “Every victory is a qualified victory,” he shared.<sup>159</sup> “The institutions with which we engage and in which we operate – none of them are built to be quickly responsive to the urgency of crises. We have seen marginal progress both in the church and less frequently in Congress, in state legislatures, and in the United Nations framework.” Often, Hill found it hard not to focus on the ways advocacy has fallen short, seeing all the ways that “institutions are actively resisting progress.” Hill celebrated, however, that there *has* been a change in whose voices are centered when it comes to working for change and finding solutions. “Impacted communities are at the center of conversation rather than outside. I think it is a victory that hasn’t yet manifested in solutions that match the urgency of the problem.” Hill hoped the gap between conversation and results would soon narrow in the face of urgent need. Hill’s sense of frustration at sluggish institutions mixed with his cherishing of small signs of hope and his expression of a persisting commitment to the need for social action on the environment is a compelling example of the complex relationship between social justice movements and denominational institutions described in this chapter.

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<sup>159</sup> Hill, interview.

I have pushed beyond consideration of the place of nonhuman animals in The UMC and within the eco-justice movement to understand the broader picture of how denominations work for change, how denominational leadership employs its considerable power and resources to either encourage or discourage social movements, and how activists working in groups, as individuals, or even as part of the denominational hierarchy can make effective attempts at changing a denominations' position on social justice issues. In meaningful ways, mainline denominations are institutions that *behave* like "typical" institutions: they are concerned with their own survival; they often have a hierarchical bureaucracy that balloons over time and proves unwieldy for facilitating nimble action on emergent social issues, as Stephens and others have pointed out; denominations also hold power over the policies they adopt and how they are implemented, and over the people and groups who have status within the institution. Institutional power is often self-serving, and as scholars like Elgendy have argued, working for institutional change or working *through* an institution for change can be a daunting prospect if changes are seen as threats to institutional power. The eco-justice movement, for example, was perceived as threatening to the theological unity of The UMC by some of the early denominational leaders I described in Chapter 2, and so dismissed as frivolous. Similarly, as I will show in Chapter 4, the animal rights movement has sometimes been dismissed as mere sentimentality, a particularly gendered response to the strong presence of feminist voices in animal rights activism that perceives a threat to embedded patriarchy. Institutions – whether ecclesial or secular – can resist any changes that seem to threaten the institution's survival.

On the other hand, the history of social witness, social movements, and social change led by United Methodist and mainline Protestant activists illustrates that institutional change *is* possible, whether it happens with denominational support, or despite denominational obstacles. Thinking with Pieterse, Rowe, and Nickell, and others, I have shown some of the means by which social change happens in denominational settings. Church institutions bring a theological foundation that can distinguish them from their secular counterparts. Denominations have considerable resources to deploy in social change efforts which they choose to support. Caucus groups and individual activists can maneuver through denominational structures to work for change, despite hierarchical systems which default to the status quo, as I have shown in the preceding chapters. These factors in denominational change are assets that have contributed to the ecumenical eco-justice movement over the decades, enabling the eco-justice movement to speak and act on a number of issues.

Earlier in this chapter, I described how mainline institutions sometimes adopt a default of reinscribing the human/animal binary as a way of maintaining a social and ecclesial order that makes sense of the world. Creating social change is a laborious process, and seeking to make changes to the very *habitus* of a complicated cultural reality such as that embodied in a global religious denomination like The UMC is a monumental task. Effecting change that strikes at the human/animal dualism threatens a core way that humans understand their identity. As I reviewed the assets of institutions and the persistence of individual and collective change agents – prophets speaking out in a priestly world – I demonstrated, however, the possibilities for pushing the boundaries of the *habitus*, paving the way for lasting change. If mainline institutions can contribute

significantly to environmental movements – can they also work on decentering the human to find a place for the moral worth of nonhuman animals in their theoethical priorities? How might denominations like The UMC decenter the human to embrace a less anthropocentric worldview? In the next chapter I turn to a study of the animal rights movement in concert with prominent streams of environmental philosophy, exposing obstacles that have kept nonhuman animals from playing a more significant role in the eco-justice movement.

CHAPTER FOUR: BARRIERS AND BRIDGES  
ANIMAL RIGHTS, ECOLOGICAL HOLISM,  
AND THE ECO-JUSTICE MOVEMENT

“Nature ... is not fair; it does not respect the rights of individuals.” – J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (1989)<sup>1</sup>

“The rights view is a view about the moral rights of individuals. Species are not individuals, and the rights view does not recognize the moral rights of species to anything, including survival.” – Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983)<sup>2</sup>

As with many social movements, to speak of a singular animal rights movement is misleading. The animal rights movement in fact encompasses many and sometimes contradictory schools of thought. Even the term “animal rights” is not universally adopted among advocates and activists for nonhuman animals, as I discuss below. The animal rights movement has addressed a wide range of issues related to animals, and has had no single leader, although there are prominent figures with a wide influence. Not all animal rights activists share the same goals and strategies for change. Nonetheless, the animal rights movement has still made an important mark as a social movement, the impact of which can be seen in societal changes such as the drastically expanded availability of vegan and vegetarian food items and cruelty-free labels on products in groceries stores and restaurants over the last twenty years. The animal rights movement and the eco-justice movement, though, have had little connection, despite unfolding in

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<sup>1</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 51.

<sup>2</sup> Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 359.

the same time frame.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I explore some of the obstacles that have contributed to the separation between these two movements.

I have already argued that part of the reason why the animal rights movement has not found a home in mainline Protestant denominations like The United Methodist Church is because of seemingly competing commitments from the eco-justice movement to other compelling justice concerns, like an important emphasis on the work of environmental justice, work that seeks to highlight and eliminate environmental racism visited on racially and economically marginalized communities. The UMC's environmental work, traced in Chapter 2's case study, provided examples of the denomination's attention to a people-centered eco-justice ethic. The UMC's prioritization of human-centric environmental advocacy over legislative priorities that might strengthen the rights of nonhuman animals, however, is only one part of the story of why mainline denominations have not had deeper connections with advocating for animal rights.

In this chapter, I examine other significant barriers to a more collaborative relationship between the eco-justice and animal rights movements. The animal rights movement represents a threat to the status quo of anthropocentrism, the dominant worldview both in many religious traditions and in the wider culture of the global West. Beyond the fundamental way animal rights ideology troubles anthropocentric norms, the animal rights movement is rife with its own complicated history and tactics, making the movement a challenging partner for collaborative work on justice issues, including environmental advocacy. To better understand this, I detail major themes in the animal rights movement, expanding on my introductory remarks. I contend that the animal rights

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<sup>3</sup> I note some exceptions to this lack of connection between movements in Chapter 1.

movement has failed to connect with mainline Protestantism because of its own internal failures that challenge the movement's ability to work well with other justice movements. I identify barriers to a closer relationship between the eco-justice and animal rights movement. As I have already demonstrated, the eco-justice movement and its embodiment in The United Methodist Church are intentionally highly intersectional, not only emphasizing but depending on an integrated approach to justice issues as part of its theoethical outlook. An animal rights movement with a limited view of how it works alongside other justice-seeking movements is unlikely to thrive in conjunction with the eco-justice movement.<sup>4</sup>

Because there is no single thread of animal rights activism, I trace a brief history of the complex and multilayered movement, and then turn my attention to another barrier between the eco-justice and animal rights movements: ecological holism. I argue that the eco-justice movement's perspective on nonhuman animals relies – whether explicitly or implicitly – on a framework of ecological or environmental holism, a perspective championed by environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott that values animals as part of a larger ecosystem, while minimizing the value of individual animals in their own right. I have referred already in the Introduction to the ecological holism perspective, an environmental approach that emphasizes the value of biotic communities as a whole and what is best for them, rather than what might be best for any individual aspect of an ecosystem. The UMC's advocacy work related to animals consists almost exclusively of

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<sup>4</sup> As I noted in Chapter 1, many environmental activists in The UMC use other language to describe their work in place of “eco-justice” language. Whether the language is “climate justice” or “creation justice” or “creation care,” the same barriers between collaboration with the animal rights movement persist.

work on the Endangered Species Act, often as part of the coalition of the Eco-Justice Working Group. Most mentions of animals in denominational materials refer to animals either as species to protect, or even as equivalent to plant life and the rest of nonhuman nature, a homogenization of the “other” that is used to prop up a definition of humanity, reliant on the construct of the “master model” of dualisms that ecofeminist Val Plumwood outlines in her work.<sup>5</sup> This approach to animals implies that the denomination is concerned for animals as a whole, as part of the biotic community, rather than for the lives of individual animals as creatures of moral worth. An exploration of the tenets of environmental holism shows that eco-justice theology not only fits well within the framework of holism, but also that some eco-justice activists, like Holmes Rolston III, have been directly connected with Callicott and the holism perspective.

Holism is a valuable ecological perspective that *seeks* to decenter the human, making humans part of the web of creation. In practice, I argue, ecological holists apply their philosophy differently to humans and to animals, and, as I describe below, they outright reject much of the ideology of the contemporary animal rights movement. Building on the work of ecofeminist environmental ethicist Anna L. Peterson, and ecofeminist philosopher Marti Kheel, I explore avenues for connection between an animal-ethic that focuses on individual creatures and a holistic approach that favors species protection, searching for a perspective that sets both humans and nonhuman animals in their place as part of the entangled network of all beings, valuing both single creatures and communities of beings.

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 2 for some examples of the ways animals and plant life are grouped together in UMC social statements. I describe Plumwood’s master model first in the Introduction, and then return to a more extensive review of Plumwood’s work in Chapter 5.

Finally, returning to the animal rights movement, I explore the work of thinkers within the field of Christian animal advocacy, a diverse theological and ethical subsection of a larger movement, and a potential source for connections between an individualistic animal ethic and a holistic environmental framework. As I have noted, many religious traditions rely on concepts of “the animal” as a contrast for understanding the concept of what it means to be “human.”<sup>6</sup> Understanding the role of animals, then, is an essential task in the construction of many religious worldviews, even if religious thinkers do not always acknowledge how much is owed to the place of the animal in religious worldviews.

In order to demonstrate the complexity of even the religious/Christian animal rights movement, I examine conservative and evangelical Christian approaches to animal rights like those of Anglican priest and theologian Andrew Linzey and former George W. Bush speechwriter Matthew Scully, and contrast them with the work of scholars like theologian and British Methodist clergyperson David Clough and theologian, ethicist, and United Methodist clergyperson Christopher Carter, who favor theological approaches that unravel Western dualistic understandings of the human/animal binary. I argue that the theoethical framing of the place of animals by thinkers like Clough and Carter manages to avoid the no-winner conflict between ecological holism and animal rights by focusing on a theo-centric perspective that disarms problematic dualisms.

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, religious traditions that do not rely on a sharp animal/human binary often express stronger concern for the well-being of animals as creatures of moral value. For a rich exploration the various ways religious traditions relate to animals, see Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton, eds., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

As I argue for a reconceived eco-justice ethic for mainline Protestantism that makes room for nonhuman animals as creatures of moral worth and significance, addressing deeply entrenched conflicts between schools of thought in animal rights and environmentalism is a critical task. After demonstrating the rift in ideologies, I show how some theologians are forging a path forward that holds potential as a basis for reconciliation between movements.

### The Early Animal Rights Movement

People have engaged in advocacy for nonhuman animals for many years. Nineteenth century activism already employed animal “rights” language, although early usage of the term implied no difference in approach from “care” or “welfare” language.<sup>7</sup> Ecofeminist sociologist Corey Lee Wrenn, in her work *Piecemeal Protest: Animal Rights in the Age of Nonprofits*, points to activity in the UK in the 1820s as an important foundation for the contemporary animal rights movement. In 1822, Richard Martin and others including Church of England clergyperson Arthur Broome, noted abolitionist William Wilberforce, and others concerned with animal protection formed the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to report animal cruelty, prosecute perpetrators, and encourage better treatment of animals.<sup>8</sup> Shaped by the religious

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<sup>7</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Great Britain passed legislation in 1822 called The Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act (known as Martin’s Act) that made some kinds of abuse of animals illegal, but left enforcement of the new legislation to regular citizens. Martin, for whom the law was named, and his colleagues formed the SPCA in response to the new law. The organization was renamed the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in 1940 after Queen Victoria granted permission for the name change, signifying a level of support from the royal family. "Our History," 2026, accessed 13 January, 2026, <https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/howweare/history>.

convictions of its founders, the SPCA's 1832 statement on its mission described its work as "based on the Christian Faith and on Christian Principles."<sup>9</sup> A U.S counterpart to the SPCA was established in 1866: the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was founded by Henry Bergh, focusing on the exploitation of working animals, unhoused domesticated animals, and animals used for food. Historian Diane L. Beers writes that the U.S. animal rights movement was shaped by the Civil War and abolitionist movements, with early leaders drawing on both the values and the strategic operations of abolitionism in their work.<sup>10</sup> Both the SPCA and the ASPCA faced similar conflicts about issues like hunting and meat consumption among members.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside the work of the SPCA and the ASPCA, the anti-vivisection movement arose in the late nineteenth century in response to emerging practices in the sciences that employed living animals for surgical experimentation, often conducted without anesthesia or pain medications. The anti-vivisection movement challenged ideological notions about the human right to use animals as objects or resources, pushing beyond the work of animal cruelty organizations emphasizing care of pets or animal workers.<sup>12</sup> Akin to the anti-animal cruelty movement leaders, leaders in the anti-vivisection movement also drew on Christian theology and imagery, writes theologian Antonia Gorman, railing against the "depravity of science" and viewing their work as a holy crusade and

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<sup>9</sup> Gorman, "Surrogate Suffering," 379-80. Gorman argues that the antivivisection movement was infused with a kind of secularized atonement theology, with animals serving as substitutionary sacrifices for human lives.

<sup>10</sup> Diane L. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

themselves as “soldiers of Christ engaged in battle.”<sup>13</sup> The anti-vivisection movement also mirrored the anti-animal cruelty movement in its reliance on funding from wealthy donors, which resulted in tensions over practices and priorities. Some, for example, criticized anti-vivisection activists for prioritizing animal treatment over the treatment of poor humans, pressuring the movement to adjust their aims or lose funding.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to efforts to eliminate animal cruelty and to abolish animal vivisection, the late nineteenth century saw a growing interest in vegetarian diets, shaped in part in the U.S. by “the rapid and extraordinary growth of the U.S. meat industry,” reports Beers.<sup>15</sup> Not all vegetarians adopted the diet on behalf of animals, though; many adopted a meat-free diet for health or spiritual reasons, with the benefits for animals being a secondary result.<sup>16</sup> Whether to focus on the abolition of eating animals and/or using them for human purposes or to focus on the improvement of the lives of animals used by humans is not only a contemporary division in the animal rights movement; such disputes over the most strategic focus of the animal rights movement were also early topics.<sup>17</sup> As sociologist Donna Maurer notes, vegetarian diets have long been associated with

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<sup>13</sup> Gorman, "Surrogate Suffering," 382.

<sup>14</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 58-59. See also Benjamin Zeller, E. , "Quasi-Religious American Foodways: The Case of Vegetarianism and Locavorism," in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, ed. Benjamin Zeller, E. et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Zeller discusses how vegetarianism has functioned as a type of religious practice in the United States, even describing adopting a vegetarian diet as a kind of conversion experience akin to the Apostle Paul's conversion in the New Testament.

<sup>17</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 54. Some vegetarian movement leaders criticized other animal activists who still ate meat, while some who adopted vegetarianism believed that securing at least some protections for animals through incremental changes would prove more successful over time.

femininity, leading some (male) movement leaders to hesitate emphasizing the practice.<sup>18</sup> By the twentieth century, vegan activists, focused on ethical food practices and dissatisfied with vegetarian groups that did not prioritize animals, began to pull away from vegetarian organizations, leading, for example, to the formation of the Vegan Society in the United Kingdom in 1944.<sup>19</sup>

Animal activist groups battled gender-based discrimination, sometimes resulting in leadership struggles over who was best equipped to lead efforts for change. Factions of animal activists of the early twentieth century were wary of making the connections that some feminist activists were making between women's rights and animal protection efforts, worrying that the attention to women's suffrage would detract from attention to cruelty prevention or antivivisection causes.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, prominent ASPCA leaders declared that they felt "uncomfortable" with women taking on leadership roles in regional chapters of the organization, accusing women of sentimentalizing the organization's goals.<sup>21</sup> Even where women were key founders of animal rights organizations, they were barred from formal leadership.<sup>22</sup> Despite the discomfort of some male leaders, though, women's auxiliary groups began to form in the mid-nineteenth

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<sup>18</sup> Donna Maurer, *Vegetarianism: Movement or Moment?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the Massachusetts branch of the SPCA, for example, founded through the efforts of activist Emily Appleton (though only Appleton's husband served on the board of directors), regularly included articles by Julia Ward Howe and Harriet Beech Stowe on women's suffrage, worker rights, and other social issues. *Ibid.*, 64. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 48-51.

<sup>21</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Earle White, for example, helped found the Philadelphia chapter of the SPCA and also founded the American Anti-Vivisection Society, but she was soon excluded from the roles of organization president or board member. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 46.

century, paving a pathway for women's leadership and for spinoff organizations, such as the New York Women's League for Animals.<sup>23</sup> While the critique of "sentimentalization" was frequently leveled at women and their leadership within animal activist organizations (both in first and second wave activism), some feminists intentionally embraced "sentimentalization" all the more vigorously, claiming that appealing to emotion was the "sole safeguard" against violent human instincts of disregard for animals.<sup>24</sup> Leaders like feminist antivivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe also formed their own organizations, such as the National Anti-Vivisection Society, attempting to wrest control from patriarchal leaders and seeking to declare a strict abolitionist approach to vivisection.<sup>25</sup>

### Second-Wave Animal Activism

Wrenn calls the period beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present day "Second-Wave Animal Activism," the period that best shows how and why the animal rights movement and the eco-justice movement have not worked as partners. Wrenn argues that by the 1970s, the animal rights movement already contained significant "factionalism," with divisions among various activists over the connection between animals and women's rights, over whether to emphasize vegetarianism or veganism, and related to "tactics and goals" of the movement.<sup>26</sup> Second-wave activism emerged partly in response to changes in the agricultural industry. The term "factory farming" was first

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<sup>23</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 65; Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. Cobbe also founded the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

used by Ruth Harrison, an animal rights activist, in her 1964 book *Animal Machines*. Harrison called attention to the problems created by the focus on “efficiency” in industrialized agriculture: animals were overcrowded, required harmful modifications to live together in massive numbers, and were slaughtered in painful ways. Following publication of her work, activists achieved some legislative victories for animal protections in agricultural settings, and several new organizations, such as Compassion in World Farming, Farm Animal Rights Movement, and Farm Sanctuary, were founded that focused particularly on farmed animal welfare.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, “rights” language was becoming more prominent, reflecting the wider cultural context of the U.S. Civil Rights movement.<sup>28</sup> The Fund for Animals, established in 1967, centered “rights” language in its literature, and other groups changed their names to reflect a centering of “rights” work. The National Catholic Society for Animal Welfare, for example, reorganized as the Society for Animal Rights in 1972.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the many contributions of women in the movement, second-wave activists continued to marginalize women in leadership. For example, literary critic and animal rights activist Brigid Brophy is one of just two women whose work appears in Andrew Linzey and Paul Barry Clarke’s *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology*, which spanned from ancient texts to late twentieth century texts.<sup>30</sup> Although not typically

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<sup>27</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 81. See more about these organizations: Compassion in World Farming, <https://www.ciwf.com/>, Farm Animal Rights Movement, <https://farmusa.org/>, and Farm Sanctuary, <https://www.farmsanctuary.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> I explore connections between Civil Rights, animal rights, and race in the section on “Stumbling Blocks” later in this chapter.

<sup>29</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 149-50.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Linzey and Paul Barry Clarke, *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The other essay from a woman is “The Feminist Challenge” by feminist

labeled a “feminist,” Brophy’s 1965 essay certainly takes a feminist tone, as she recounts the gendered nature arguments against animal rights. She sarcastically details the labels often given to women animal rights activists:

The reader will have guessed in some detail by now what sort of person he confronts in me: a sentimentalist; probably a killjoy; a person with no grasp on economic realities; a twee anthropomorphiser, who attributes human feelings (and no doubt human names and clothes as well) to animals, and yet actually prefers animals to humans and would sooner succour a stray cat than an orphan child: a latterday version of those folklore English spinsters who in the nineteenth century excited the ridicule of the natives by walking round Florence requesting them not to ill-treat their donkeys; and *par excellence*, of course, a crank.<sup>31</sup>

Brophy’s words depict the kinds of critiques that were still being leveled against women in the second-wave animal rights movements, insults that belittled women’s activism as mere sentimentality, a result of women’s emotionalism.

In *Rethinking Animal Rights*, scholars Emily Patterson-Kane, Michael P. Allen, and Jennifer Eadie argue that academic interest in animal rights in the 1970s led to a masculinization of the entire movement.<sup>32</sup> Wrenn concurs, suggesting that animals-focused philosophers and intellectuals lent legitimacy to the movement. Academics who gain notoriety, like Peter Singer, “intervene on a movement’s trajectory,” she argues, influencing the movement’s expansion, but also intensifying the movement’s internal divisions, forcing activists to choose to adopt or contradict the theories of the academy or

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biologist Lynda Birke. The exclusion of other women’s and/or feminist voices from Linzey’s co-edited anthology might suggest a lack of women’s voices on animal rights, but Linzey is overlooking a significant part of the rich historical record of women’s perspectives on animal rights, some of which are included in this dissertation.

<sup>31</sup> Brigid Brophy, “The Rights of Animals,” in *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Paul Barry Clarke (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 157-58.

<sup>32</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 88.

of a particular high-profile scholar.<sup>33</sup> Singer's utilitarian ethics dismissed sentiment and focused on reason, throwing off critics of animal rights who made gendered critiques of animal activism as "emotional and impractical."<sup>34</sup>

As animal rights gained attention from a widening field of interested groups, factionalism among the growing number of animal rights organizations posed a significant challenge in second-wave animal rights work. As described here, differences in approach always played a role in those concerned with the welfare of nonhuman animals. The number of animal rights organizations expanded rapidly in the post-Civil Rights era, however, resulting in an increasing sense of division, with competition for resources and membership, and competing claims for authority over the "right" way to do animal activism.<sup>35</sup> Second-wave animal activism also saw a widening of the types of strategies employed for achieving change. In the Civil Rights era, the animal rights movement adopted some strategies of social protest from the Civil Rights movement, engaging in "street protest," rescuing animals from captivity, and staging sit-ins. Existing first-wave animal protection and antivivisection organizations, however, often did not embrace these direct action protest strategies, leading to divisions within the overall movement.<sup>36</sup> Direct action groups like the Animal Liberation Front, an international organization which formed out of the 1970s UK group Band of Mercy, employed

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<sup>33</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 67-68, 70. Although Wrenn does not specify the number of new organizations added during this period, she references the existence of "thousands of local welfare societies" and more than two hundred animal rights organizations, which she guesses is a low estimate of existing groups.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

aggressive and sometimes illegal tactics to protest animal treatment such as arson, destruction of laboratories, and sabotaging hunting and fishing operations.<sup>37</sup> Although direct action groups did not become the primary expression of the animal rights movement, Wrenn argues that such groups *did* influence the mainstream movement by encouraging activists connected to more “conservative” animal protection/animal cruelty prevention agencies to break away and form new organizations with less tolerance for compromise on values.<sup>38</sup> Maurer describes the divide between strategies as a difference between “moral shock” techniques” and strategies favoring “gentle education,” with membership in various factions remaining quite separate.<sup>39</sup> Direct action groups targeted “the media, the consumer, and the profit-minded corporations,” writes Beers, and although many in the larger movement questioned their techniques, their protests “changed Americans forever,” leading, for example, to a decline in the sale of fur clothing products, the emergence of “dolphin-safe” tuna products, and a rapid drop in levels of veal consumption.<sup>40</sup>

The question of the role of violence in activism, regardless of any successes of direct action strategies, has been one of the most contentious disputes in the animal rights movement, but by the 1990s, a new era of “professionalization” in animal advocacy

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 68. The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) has no website, as it functions as a decentralized and anarchist movement, and has been described as a terrorist group by the U.S. government. Ingrid Newkirk, executive director of P.E.T.A (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals,” has written a book on the ALF’s history, strongly supporting their work: Ingrid Newkirk, *Free the Animals: The Amazing True Story of the Animal Liberation Front* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 68-69.

<sup>39</sup> Maurer, *Vegetarianism*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 200.

organizations shifted the movement away from more radical approaches, in favor of a more conservative strategic approach.<sup>41</sup> Wrenn defines professionalization as

a process of becoming more bureaucratic in style and structure, often enacted by incorporating as a registered charity. It prioritizes the procurement of donations and advocates a moderation in claims-making to stabilize resources. It is generally understood to improve a group's ability to amass the symbolic capital necessary to secure a tenuous foothold in the contentious social movement arena and manufacture influence.<sup>42</sup>

As more organizations were forming and adopting a “professionalized” presence in society, like The Vegan Society, activists in these organizations rejected direct action groups and their violent tactics, insisting that they only reinforced negative depictions of animal rights workers, depictions that the factory farming industry was happy to spread in an effort to suppress movement support.<sup>43</sup> Animal rights organizations like Compassion Over Killing and Vegan Outreach shifted their tone, often impacted by their financial backers, just like first wave animal activism.<sup>44</sup> Once professionalized organizations like those listed above started growing in size, receiving grant funding from a variety of sources, and relying on regular fundraising from supporters, the organizations shifted from a “radical vegan” tone committed to abolitionist stances to a “vague language about [animal] suffering.”<sup>45</sup> A “bureaucratized” strategy emerged among some advocacy

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<sup>41</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72. See more about The Vegan Society at <https://www.vegansociety.com/>.

<sup>44</sup> Compassion Over Killing, now known as Animal Outlook, focuses on undercover investigations in the agribusiness industry, seeking to uncover animal abuse. This kind of undercover work is often subject to persecution, with violators facing steep fines and sometimes imprisonment. See <https://animaloutlook.org/>. Vegan Outreach seeks to end animal suffering by supporting people in adopting a vegan diet. See <https://veganoutreach.org/>.

<sup>45</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 94.

organizations, focusing on the “three Rs” of “refining, reducing, and replacing” the use of animals in contexts like scientific laboratories, settling for more moderate “wins” moving incrementally towards abolition.<sup>46</sup> The professionalization of the rights movement, Wrenn contends, leads to a moderation of messaging, with less “confrontational” tactics.<sup>47</sup> As a result, argue Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, the larger U.S. culture, while influenced by the animal rights movement, is open to animal welfare campaigns, but less responsive to advocacy for animal *rights*.<sup>48</sup>

Wrenn’s concept of professionalization has clear links to Bourdieu’s understanding of *habitus* and the effects of bureaucracy and institutionalization on movements I discussed in Chapter 3. Wrenn lays a variety of critiques at the feet of contemporary professionalized organizations that resonate with critiques of the suppressed prophetic voice of mainline denominational church. Professionalized organizations are less likely to publicly address any factionalism in the animal rights movement (with notable exceptions like Feminists for Animal Rights, a sign, Wrenn says, of the organization’s commitment to transparency and democratic decision-making); instead, organizations simply do not work collaboratively so that disagreements do not need addressing.<sup>49</sup> They are also more likely to moderate the “asks” in their work, softening language to reach a broader audience and garner increased financial support. Disagreement over terms like “humane,” “welfare,” and “rights” remains one the most

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<sup>46</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 99-100.

divisive topics within animal activism. Professionalized organizations define these terms differently than more radical groups like the Animal Liberation Front, with the latter groups insisting that more muted understandings of these concepts leads to a perpetuation of speciesism and violence against animals.<sup>50</sup> Professionalized groups, seeking broad appeal and easier entry points for people interested in aspects of their work but not necessarily committed to animal rights as a whole, tend toward the language of “compassion” for animals, highlighting animal suffering. For example, a Vegan Outreach brochure from 2004 titled “Even If You Like Meat” declares that is it “not trying to defend veganism, but striving to prevent suffering.”<sup>51</sup>

Maurer notes that people connect to animal rights because of a variety of motivations – to focus on health, because of concerns about animal testing, to better care for the environment, or because of a passion for pets.<sup>52</sup> The contemporary animal rights movement seeks to embrace those who want to engage in activism (like abstaining from eating animal products or protesting against animal shelters that kill unadopted animals) regardless of motivation. As Wrenn has suggested, the broad welcome offered by professionalized organizations means that factionalism in the movement persists, with no “resolution” likely to emerge.

### Schools of Thought in Animal Rights

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>52</sup> Maurer, *Vegetarianism*, 59.

As I have described, several differences separate supporters of the animal rights movement, not only in terms of preferred strategies for enacting social change, but also in complex underlying ideologies. Activists and academics in the animal rights movement disagree both on *why* animals should be protected from harm, and what the goals of advocacy are, such as improving the well-being of animals, total abolition of the use of animals by humans, or something in between those approaches. Although I cannot exhaust all the approaches to animal advocacy, I address a range of representative perspectives within the larger framework of animal rights to give a sense of the breadth of the movement. I give more sustained attention to the rights perspective of activist Tom Regan, particularly because of the debate I detail between Regan's rights perspective and the environmental holism framing of J. Baird Callicott. Finally, I discuss two important schools of thought later in this work: I attend to the theological perspectives on animal rights at the end of this chapter, and feminist animal rights ethics are explored in Chapter 5.

Anna L. Peterson, in *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics* identifies the underlying reasons scholar-activists give for supporting animal rights, outlining the main philosophical approaches to animal ethics as utilitarianism, represented especially by Peter Singer, and animal rights approaches, represented by Tom Regan and Gary Francione, and contextual ethics, represented by thinkers like environmental philosopher and theologian Clare Palmer.<sup>53</sup> Environmental law scholar Cass R. Sunstein focuses instead on groupings based on intended results of animal

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<sup>53</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 44-60. She also gives attention to religious theories of animal activism, focusing on the work of Andrew Linzey, and a feminist care ethics approach to animal advocacy, examining the work of scholars like Carol J. Adams.

activism. In his introduction to *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, co-edited with Martha C. Nussbaum, Sunstein groups the major divisions in animal advocacy into two groups: animal welfare – which Sunstein describes as those who want to protect animals – and animal rights – those who seek to turn a basic desire to protect animals into “stronger laws preventing cruelty and requiring humane treatment.”<sup>54</sup> While the aims of animal welfare groups often receive significant support across cultures, he argues, people are often less convinced in accepting or supporting the *rights* of animals beyond the “minimalist position” of assent that affirms that the law should protect animals from blatant and purposeless cruelty.<sup>55</sup> Those supporting animal rights endorse a spectrum of goals, not all in alignment, but Sunstein names eliminating the use of animals for food, scientific experimentation, entertainment (like greyhound racing, for example), and some representative beliefs of animal rights activists. For many animal rights activists, their activism is motivated by a belief that nonhuman animals “should not be subject to human use and control” and that instead they “deserve to have a kind of autonomy.”<sup>56</sup>

Sunstein advocates for a rights emphasis in advocacy, applying his law background to explore questions about animals as property. Sunstein examines a few questions of significant debate among various animal rights supporters (and detractors): Are animals *property*? Are they “persons”? Do *all* animals have rights? Many animal rights activists, particularly those like Sunstein who focus on legal protections for

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<sup>54</sup> Sunstein, "Introduction," 4-5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

animals, see potential in eradicating the perspective of animals as property. While some legal protections are extended to animals through their status as property of humans, other rights might be extended if animals were given more independent legal status.<sup>57</sup> Gary Francione, also operating from a legal framework, asks the kind of “property” questions Sunstein describes, reaching clear conclusions: If we reject the idea that animals are “things,” we *must* also reject the idea that animals are property. To view an animal as property means viewing animals as without intrinsic value.<sup>58</sup>

Francione focuses on the moral demand that animals make of humans, connecting ideas of property, personhood, and moral significance:

If we extend the right not to be property to animals, then animals will become moral persons. To say that a being is a person is merely to say that the being has morally significant interests, that the principle of equal consideration applies to that being, that the being is not a thing. In a sense we already accept that animals are persons; we claim to reject the view that animals are things and to recognize that, at the very least, animals have a morally significant interest in not suffering. Their status as property, however, has prevented their personhood from being realized.<sup>59</sup>

Francione continues, arguing that “the moral universe is limited to only two kinds of beings, persons and things.” Human society has tried, in the past, to create a “quasi person” or “thing plus” category during the practice of enslavement. These combination categories fail; enslaved people still have moral interests, and thus they cannot possibly be belittled and degraded as things. Likewise, animal welfare laws, Francione contends,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>58</sup> Gary L. Francione, "Animals - Property or Persons?," *ibid.*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum, 120. Francione laments, however, that society’s actions make clear that animals are property – bought and sold for the purpose of killing and obtaining as much profit from the exchange as possible.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 131.

try to label animals as “quasi-persons” or “things-plus,” but this approach to protecting animals will always fail, since animals clearly *do* have interests all their own.<sup>60</sup>

Since this dissertation focuses on anthropocentrism in eco-justice theoethics, I must point out that the animal rights movement itself is not free from anthropocentrism. Indeed, some animal rights activists are explicit in their human-centered approaches to animal rights, even using a human-focus to craft an ethic of animal advocacy. For example, legal scholar Richard A. Posner, for example, contends that “the best approach to the question of animal rights is a humancentric one that appeals to our developing knowledge and sentiments about animals and that eschews on the one hand philosophical argument and on the other hand a legal-formalist approach to the issue.”<sup>61</sup> Posner urges cultivating empathy toward animals by encouraging people to see the suffering of animals “as their own,” thus prompting people to act in their own self-interest.

Many animal rights scholars and activists, like Posner, respond in their work to criticism from those who suggest that supporting animal rights is about conflating difference between humans and animals, adopting one set of guidelines for ethical behavior towards human and nonhuman animals alike. Francione and Posner are only two of many who make sure to clarify in their scholarship that there is room and reason for treating animals differently than humans and prioritizing human needs in specific situations. Animal rights philosopher Cora Diamond, for example, criticizes animal rights

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 131-32. Francione is clear, though, that just because he assigns “person” status to animals, he does not mean that animals are human persons. Humans and animals do not require the same treatment. In certain situations “of genuine conflict,” humans still must choose their own interests above the interest of animals. Situations of genuine conflict simply arise less often than most people believe. Typically, he finds, the “conflict” between humans and animals is of human making and unnecessary.

<sup>61</sup> Richard A. Posner, "Animal Rights: Legal, Philosophical, and Pragmatic Perspectives," *ibid.*, 51.

arguments that begin with discussions of human rights, since they tend to lead people to ask how human and animal rights are similar, which she rejects as a starting point. Implying that humans and animals have rights according to the same philosophical framework, she argues, sets up comparisons and looks for similarities between animals and humans that are unnecessary in order to justify extending rights to animals.<sup>62</sup> In fact, she argues, our very concept of “human being” is so different from our concept of “animal” that we need better arguments to advocate for the rights of animals.<sup>63</sup> Diamond argues that being a human means that we have moral obligations and expectations placed on us – we must respond to the moral appeal that animals’ very existence makes to us, to consider and treat animals with care.<sup>64</sup>

While Diamond tries to distinguish between animals and humans and how they are valued, while maintaining an ethic of justice for animals, feminist philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum explicitly seeks to reframe rights extended to humans in ways that encompass animals as well. She writes that defending animal rights should not be thought of as a matter of compassion, but rather as a matter of justice. Compassion can be directed toward those who are suffering, but *justice* seeks to discover and hold accountable those who are to *blame* for suffering. Further, justice for animals implies that causing their suffering is a moral wrong. “When I say that the mistreatment of animals is unjust,” she writes, “I mean to say not only that it is wrong of *us* to treat them in that way, but also that they have a right, a moral entitlement, not to be treated in that way. It is

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<sup>62</sup> Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," 95.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

unfair to them.” Animals are “active beings” who can be wronged – they are agents and subjects, “[creatures] in interaction with whom we live.”

Nussbaum’s approach, a capabilities philosophy grounded in ecofeminist care ethics which guides her larger scholarly work, treats animals as agential beings who seek “a flourishing existence.”<sup>65</sup> According to the capabilities approach, humans should be able to flourish however they can, as long as their quest for flourishing does not bring harm to others. Nussbaum sees no reason a capabilities framework should not be extended to apply to nonhuman animals as well.<sup>66</sup> She takes care to distinguish her work from a holistic perspective, noting that unlike the principles of holism, which focuses on flourishing of ecosystems and species, a capabilities approach is decidedly individual. “The capabilities approach attaches no importance to increased numbers as such,” writes Nussbaum. Instead, the capabilities approach centers the well-being of each individual creature and the harm they experience when their capabilities are curtailed. “Species are becoming extinct because human beings are killing their members and damaging their natural environments. Thus, damage to species occurs through damage to individuals, and this individual damage should be the focus of ethical concern within the capabilities approach.”<sup>67</sup> Concern for whole species is only significant for Nussbaum because of active harm caused by humans – preventing the flourishing of other creatures.

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<sup>65</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Beyond “Compassion and Humanity”: Justice for Nonhuman Animals,” *ibid.*, 301-02. I discuss ecofeminist care ethics in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 305. Nussbaum does not explicitly define “harm” in her article, although her capabilities approach implies that doing harm is denying a human or animal other the ability to live out the capabilities she enumerates, which I address later in this section.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 308, 13-17. Nussbaum concludes by reviewing a list of capabilities that she has previously offered as important to human rights, including broad categories like life, health, bodily integrity, emotion, and control over one’s environment. She adapts this list only slightly to apply it to “all sentient animals,”

Finally, I turn to the work of philosopher and activist Tom Regan. Regan argues that both humans and animals are what he describes as “subjects-of-a-life,” a phrase he argues better describes humans than terms like “person” or “human being,” since it better emphasizes the characteristics that “[*make*] *us all equal* in a way that makes sense of our moral equality.” To be a subject-of-a-life emphasizes our shared earthly home, that “what happens to us matters to us,” and that we share a moral status.<sup>68</sup> Animals are also subject-of-a-life because what happens to animals matters to animals.<sup>69</sup>

Regan tackles the question of defining what “rights” *are*, outlining several characteristics: Rights are something stronger than values, and something that are shared equally among all who have them. They are demanded, or framed as innate or pre-existing, rather than something requested. Violating the rights of another is a moral wrong.<sup>70</sup> Animals are not required to understand what rights are to be entitled to them, anymore than human children must understand rights to possess them.<sup>71</sup>

Regan’s later work, less academic in tone, strikes a more conciliatory approach to animal rights. His most famous work, however, *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), makes clear that at its core that his rights approach has no space for environmentalism that focuses on ecosystems. Regan takes on the “good of the species” argument from environmentalism, expounding at length on the topic of protecting endangered species

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suggesting that these capabilities should be protected for all creatures in constitutions and through supportive legislation, and not only by individual nations, but through international cooperation.

<sup>68</sup> Regan, *Empty Cages*, 50-51.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

from an animal rights perspective. He is clear from the start: “The rights view is a view about the moral rights of individuals. Species are not individuals, and the rights view does not recognize the moral rights of species to anything, including survival.”<sup>72</sup> The rights of individual animals should be protected, and it makes no moral difference for Regan *how many* of a particular species of animal there are. They matter as individual animals. Regan and others employing “the rights view” do not oppose efforts to protect species, but instead urge “that we be clear about the reasons for doing so.” The rights view supports species protection because it protects individual animals. Otherwise, Regan argues, people might assume that harming animals that are plentiful in number is morally acceptable or at least morally better than harming an endangered animal, a conclusion Regan rejects.<sup>73</sup>

Regan sharply critiques environmentalist Aldo Leopold’s land ethic with its focus on the biotic community.<sup>74</sup> “The implication of this view includes the clear prospect that the individual may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good,” Regan writes. “It is difficult to see how the notion of the rights of the individual could find a home within a view

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<sup>72</sup> Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 359-60.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 360-61. Regan spends time answering common objections to his perspective to clarify his p. For example, he appeals to the “miniride” principle to make complex ethical choices involving animals (and humans), which says that if some being’s rights have to be overridden, you should override the rights of the few rather than the rights of the many. Important to Regan in this approach is that each subject-of-a-life still counts for one, and only one. No individual subjects matters more or less than another. Regan also evokes a “worse-off principle” that considers the magnitude of harm to different parties. If the harm to some is extraordinary while the harm to others is mild to moderate, it is appropriate that many might suffer a mild harm in order to prevent extraordinary harm to a few. 305-312.

<sup>74</sup> Regan refers to Leopold’s writing in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Leopold’s land ethic argues that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” I describe Leopold’s work further in relationship to the work of J. Baird Callicott below. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac; with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968 (1949)), 262.

that ... might be fairly dubbed ‘environmental fascism.’”<sup>75</sup> Fascism thrives on protecting the “rights” of the state or the rights of a race with a nation over the protection of individual rights, which Regan reads on to protecting the ecosystem at the unexamined expense of the individual animal. The rights view, Regan emphasizes, “categorically denies that inanimate objects can have rights,” while Leopold’s land ethic, he speculates, could potentially argue that wildflowers collectively are more valuable than individual animals. “Environmental fascism and the rights view are like oil and water: they don’t mix.” Regan takes Leopold’s perspective to an extreme that Leopold himself does not articulate, but Regan thinks his extrapolation is a “not unfair example” of the consequences of Leopold’s philosophy.<sup>76</sup> While natural systems do have value, their value cannot be measured alongside the values of an individual. “Rights-holders are individuals.”<sup>77</sup> Animal rights, in Regan’s view, value the individual in ways that must not be dismissed in exchange for elevating the good of the whole.

*The Case for Animal Rights* evoked a strong response from environmentalists, according to environmental philosopher and ethicist J. Baird Callicott. Callicott spends nearly a third of his essays in his 1989 work *In Defense of the Land Ethic* responding both to the animal rights movement broadly, and Regan’s book specifically, with great attention to Regan’s use of the phrase “environmental fascism.” Callicott had published a version of his holistic approach to animal liberation in 1980 in an article titled, “Animal

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<sup>75</sup> Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 361-62.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 361-62.

Liberation: A Triangular Affair,” an article he includes again in his collection of essays.<sup>78</sup> Response to the article from the animal rights community “has led to an increasingly acrimonious estrangement between advocates of individualistic animal welfare ethics and advocates of holistic ecocentric ethics,” he reports, a division he calls “regrettable” and “divisive” because the conflict makes working on common goals of preventing harm to the “non-human world” exceptionally difficult.<sup>79</sup> I return to Callicott’s work, his conflict with animal rights ideologies, and an exploration of ecological holism later in this chapter.

While Regan’s *Empty Cages* (2004), his last major work, makes no mention of his fundamental conflict with holist viewpoints, he also makes no mention of environmental concern in his many explanations for the value of animal advocacy.<sup>80</sup> Animal advocacy is important because animals have rights, and are subjects-of-a-life, like human beings. This justification for advocacy is sufficient. Regan’s last work remains remarkably single-issue focused. He makes no connection between the well-being of animals and the well-being of the rest of the ecosystem. He makes no mention of environmentalism in relation to nonhuman animals, and he also fails to engage with gender or race in relationship to animals. In his quest to center the nonhuman animal, he fails to place the animal in any context of relatedness.<sup>81</sup> Whereas he concludes that holism fails to attend to individual

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<sup>78</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-228. The article appears in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, pp. 15-38.

<sup>79</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 49.

<sup>80</sup> Regan, *Empty Cages*.

<sup>81</sup> This critique could be directed at some, though not all, of the other animal rights scholars discussed in this chapter. Francione, for example, is, like Regan, extremely singularly focused in his work,

animals, his work is illustrative of how animal rights scholarship has sometimes failed to consider individual animals as an interconnected part of our present planetary crisis. Although not all animal rights scholars neglect attention to environmental concerns, the frequency of the animal rights movement's failure to address significant themes in environmentalism in relation to animal rights is problematic, closing off what should be an important partnership, with animal rights activists drawing on the plentiful ecologically grounded motivations for treating animals with justice and compassion, and environmentalism taking into consideration the intrinsic value of all creatures – not only as species, but as individuals. I will continue to explore this theme as I turn to an exploration of ecological holism later in this chapter.

This foray into major themes in the animal rights movement only touches on the complexities of the field. The selection of scholarship explored here, however, gives ample examples to demonstrate the factionalism described by Wrenn, and shows how an animal rights ethic frequently stands in opposition to prominent themes in environmentalism. Even while animal rights theorists might articulate a different understanding of why animals have rights, or *what* rights of animals need safeguarding, animal rights theory is overwhelmingly engaging with the protection of individual animals, considering the welfare of each singular animal life. This approach contrasts sharply with themes prominent in ecological holism and deep ecology. With such distinctive and even opposing ways of prioritizing animal life, the disconnect between

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while Nussbaum's consideration of animals is part of her larger work on capabilities, which also includes attention to ecological concerns.

animal rights and environmentalism seems inevitable. I turn later in this chapter to perspectives that are working to bridge the divide.

### Stumbling Blocks: Challenges in the Animal Rights Movement

I have already touched on some concerning themes in the animal rights movement, including mention of misogynistic, trivializing attitudes toward women in the movement, and the “in house” disagreements between ideologies and strategies that have kept the movement from functioning more effectively. The animal rights movement has encountered still other stumbling blocks, adopting tactics that alienate potential social justice partners at best, and tactics that reveal racist ideologies and manipulative action plans at worst.

Second-wave animal rights activists gained momentum alongside the Civil Rights movement, even adopting some of the movement’s protest strategies, as I described above. Like the emergence of the eco-justice movement, the second-wave animal rights movement emerged in the context of significant socio-cultural change and a widening recognition of the lack of equal rights in many societal contexts. Nonetheless, where the eco-justice movement intentionally sought out partnerships and alignment with racial justice advocacy, the animal rights movement did not. Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie note that the animal rights movement consistently failed to meaningfully address problems of racial injustice or exploitation both in the larger society and within its own

organizations, even while drawing on shared values and strategies to support its activism.<sup>82</sup>

Instead of working collaboratively for racial justice and animal rights, organizational leaders in the animal rights movements have sometimes co-opted racial struggles to make comparisons to animal suffering. In her introduction to *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, feminist and critical race theorist A. Breeze Harper recalls a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) campaign that conflated the suffering of Native Americans, Jews in the Holocaust, African and African Americans in slavery, and animals on factory farms.<sup>83</sup> Harper critiques PETA for the “trigger trauma” imposed by the ad on several minority groups, arguing that animal activists must do better to act as allies in other justice movements.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in her collection of essays co-authored with sister Aph Ko, Syl Ko criticizes the “diversity” efforts of many animal rights groups that assume that simply including Black and Indigenous persons in spaces where they were previously excluded, is a “decolonizing measure.”<sup>85</sup> Mainstream veganism, Ko argues, focuses on the “animal problem” as a single issue, not focusing on coloniality at all, and efforts at inclusivity have been shallow at best.<sup>86</sup> Worse, Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie remark, support for

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<sup>82</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*.

<sup>83</sup> A. Breeze Harper, *Sistah Vegan: Black female vegans speak on food, identity, health, and society* (Woodstock, NY: Lantern Books, 2009), xiii-xiv.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

<sup>85</sup> Syl Ko, "Revaluing the Human As a Way to Revalue the Animal," in *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, ed. Aph Ko and Syl Ko (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2020), 106.

<sup>86</sup> Ko, "Black Veganism Revisited," 122.

animal welfare campaigns in the U.S. that target “foreign” cultural practices, such as Japanese whaling practices, reinforce racist cultural stereotypes, reinscribing colonial tropes.<sup>87</sup>

Wrenn acknowledges that the animal rights movement has and does “exploit racism, sexism, mental health stigma, fat stigma, and disability stigma in its bid to promote nonhuman interests in a competitive political arena.”<sup>88</sup> She urges animal activists to focus on bridge building, saying it is the responsibility of the animal rights movement to reach out, learn from, and work for alliances where the movement has been insensitive or worse in the past.<sup>89</sup> While activists have too often tried to compare and conflate justice struggles, many feel that animal activist professionalized leaders – often people of a “privileged demographic” (White, educated, and middle/upper class) – have simultaneously failed to show up in significant ways in the movements of other activist groups.<sup>90</sup> Instead groups like PETA, for example, sometimes try to play both sides of an issue rather than taking a stance for justice with supposed allies. Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie address the “both sides” approach of some animal rights group, naming it an intentional strategy meant to rely on “a high degree of diversity in focus and commitment” of advocacy techniques.<sup>91</sup> The results of the approach are alienating to

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<sup>87</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 108.

<sup>88</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 195. Laura Fernández’s chapter, “Fattening Solidarity Beyond Species” provides examples of the kind of exploitation Wrenn describes, addressing fatphobia in the movement. Vegan and animal rights activism often depicts only thin, “healthy” individuals as emblematic of “good” activists. Laura Fernández, “Fattening Solidarity Beyond Species,” in *Feminist Animal Studies*, ed. Erika Cudworth, Ruth E. McKie, and Di Turgoose (London: 2022).

<sup>89</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 196.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>91</sup> Patterson-Kane, Allen, and Eadie, *Rethinking Animal Rights*, 109.

potential collaborative partners. Wrenn shares an example of an abortion debate taking place in North Carolina. PETA chose to erect two billboards in the town, one reading “Pro-Life? Go vegetarian, and the other reading, “Pro-Choice? Go vegetarian.” PETA argued it was more important to prevent animal slaughter than to take a clear stance alongside those supporting reproductive rights.<sup>92</sup> Wrenn also records the Vegan Society struggling with whether or not to support “gay rights” in the 1980s, with some worrying that more conservative readers of their publications would stop supporting the organization if they allowed advertising from LGBTQ+ groups<sup>93</sup>. The organization eventually decided against a ban, but the internal struggle of the organization to support other justice advocacy groups continued. Wrenn reports that by the 2010s, some professionalized animal advocacy organizations made renewed attempts to be more intersectional in their approaches. Farm Sanctuary, an organization that takes in rescued animals from the animal agriculture system and advocates for the elimination of abusive factory farming practices, tailored some of their educational materials to Black communities, highlighting examples of Black vegans and activists through history, and Vegan Outreach published a series celebrating “Women in Animal Advocacy.”<sup>94</sup> Still, for many Black vegans and other vegans of color, such attempts at late-coming allyship have

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<sup>92</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 200.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-09. See the first installment in their series here: "Clear Eyes, Full Hearts: Women in Animal Advocacy - Part 1," 2017, accessed 22 February, 2026, <https://veganoutreach.org/clear-eyes-full-hearts-women-animal-advocacy-part-1/>.

felt like too little, too late, creating an additional burden for activists who seek to counteract racism in the movement.<sup>95</sup>

Wrenn also points out the persistent misogyny in the animal rights movement, even though feminists have always had a strong presence in animal activism, as I described earlier in this chapter. Wrenn argues that “in the 200 years of advocacy on behalf of other animals, little has changed in regard to male leadership and masculine approaches to social change,” with women in the movement are still more likely “to be relegated to rank-and-file drudgery work” than to be named as executives and organizational leaders.<sup>96</sup> “Not unlike other social movements, women are disproportionately responsible for food preparation, administrative support, event

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<sup>95</sup> Veganism and vegetarianism notably have a long history outside of Western and Christian cultures. See explorations of vegan geo-cultural explorations in Saurav Kumar, "Veganism, Hinduism, and Jainism in India: A Geo-Cultural Inquiry," in *The Routledge Handbook of Vegan Studies*, ed. Laura Wright (New York: Routledge, 2021). Alexandra E. Sexton, Tara Garnett, and Jamie Lorimer, "Vegan Food Geographies and the Rise of Big Veganism," *Progress in Human Geography* 46, 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/03091325211051021>.

<sup>96</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 76. Drawing on the work of ecofeminist Lori Gruen, Wrenn describes the patriarchal structures that have long plagued the animal rights movement:

In the 200 years of advocacy on behalf of other animals, little has changed in regard to male leadership and masculine approaches to social change. As is typical with many social movements, female-identified activists found themselves relegated to less prestigious, devalued, and relatively invisible organizational and secretarial roles (Gruen 1993). The gender imbalance also speaks to the movement’s masculinized approach to collective action, which idolizes celebrity leaders and normalizes hierarchical organization. Such a formula ensures that men will disproportionately enjoy more authority and recognition in the movement, while women are more likely to be relegated to rank-and-file drudgery work. In the realm of theory, too, feminist approaches have been shadowed by the movement’s preference for rational (read: masculinized) argument. The work of movement “fathers” Singer and [Tom] Regan, for instance, had been elevated to preeminence on the topic of speciesism. Regan, at least, was receptive of movement diversity, and frequently granted financial and institutional support to feminist endeavors on behalf of other animals. Otherwise, affective frameworks for addressing speciesism were (and still are) heavily stigmatized in the highly rationalized movement culture.

Women are still less likely to be executives in animal rights organizations, although their presence as CEOs and in other leadership positions is increasing, and women remain significant majority of animal rights activists. See "Who Runs the (Animal Welfare) World? Girls.," HumanPro, 2017, accessed 22 February, 2026, <https://humanepro.org/magazine/articles/who-runs-animal-welfare-world-girls>.

planning, care work, and other feminized roles,” Wrenn writes. Women in animal rights organizations continue to be accused of emotionalism, with the denigration of the expression of emotions wielded as a “powerful sexist and ableist tool” that professionalized organizations employ against women with more “radical” perspectives.<sup>97</sup>

The stumbling blocks I have outlined in this chapter confirm that the animal rights movement has shown itself to be an unreliable ally in a struggle for justice, too often unaware or unwilling to act on the intersectional nature of oppression and injustice, or even outright engaging in manipulation of marginalized groups in order to further the cause of animal rights. In contrast to the often isolated approach of the animal rights movement, the eco-justice movement formed and thrived within mainline Protestant churches, including The UMC, attempting to adopt an intersectional approach to justice from its foundations, even if, like most movements, it has not always fully embodied its stated values, as I outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. The eco-justice movement, then, and the animal rights movement make unlikely partners. Where the eco-justice movement seeks out partnerships, the animal rights movement too often insists its aims are the most important. Where the eco-justice movement has regularly attempted, if not always successfully, to prioritize racial and environmental justice, the animal rights movement continues to be perceived as a movement that regularly centers White people.<sup>98</sup> These stumbling blocks in the implementation of animal rights theory in activist practice serve

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<sup>97</sup> Wrenn, *Piecemeal Protest*, 201-02. Wrenn shares that women leaders in the animal rights movement report that when they try to incorporate feminist critiques into their work and the work of their organizations, they receive criticism and pushback.

<sup>98</sup> Both chapters 1 and 2 outline the eco-justice movement’s engagement with racial justice and environmental justice concerns.

to account for some significant reasons why the eco-justice movement has not been an active supporter of the animal rights movement. Exploring major themes in the animal rights movement also highlights a framework for centering the moral worth of individual animal lives, which I have argued is mostly absent in eco-justice theoethics. Beyond the obstacles described above, a significant philosophical difference between animal rights and environmental ethics serves as a major barrier to collaboration between the eco-justice and animal rights movements. I turn next to exploring ecological holism in relationship to animal rights, hoping that clarifying tension points between ideologies can create space for more fruitful interaction between these perspectives in the future.

### Ecological Holism and Animal Rights

Environmental ethics is grounded on two principles, writes Anna L. Peterson. First, nature has intrinsic value. Second, nature's primary value is found in nature as a whole, rather than in the individual "parts" of nature. These principles form the basis of ecological holism.<sup>99</sup> Holism challenges anthropocentrism by arguing that not only humans have intrinsic value, but also nature – as a whole – has intrinsic value. Individual non-humans within nature are significant *because* they "contribute to the well-being of the whole."<sup>100</sup> The intrinsic value of the biotic community "matters for its own sake," without regard to its impact of effect on anything else," explains environmental ethicist Kevin O'Brien. Nature's value is not dependent on humans.

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<sup>99</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 12.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

One of the most prominent thinkers in the field of ecological holism that Peterson describes is environmental philosopher and ethicist J. Baird Callicott, whom I use as a primary representative of holist philosophy for several reasons: Callicott directly and consistently contrasts holism with animal rights perspectives. His work aligns substantially with the work of Holmes Rolston III, who, as previously mentioned, was a meaningful contributor to eco-justice perspectives on nonhuman animals. Callicott also remains the most cited figure when discussing holist philosophies – his stature in environmental philosophy is sizable and many other environmentalists engage with his work, as I share both this chapter and in Chapter 5.

Callicott's work draws heavily from Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's deep ecology. Leopold's 1949 work argues for understanding the individual (human or otherwise) to be a connected part of the interdependent community of nature. His land ethic argues that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>101</sup> Leopold's land ethic, Peterson writes, maintains a qualitative difference between humans and animals. Animals, plants, and other parts of nonhuman nature are to be treated based on their membership in the community, not on their individual characteristics. "Leopold thus condemned an instrumental treatment of nature in general," Peterson concludes, "while retaining a largely instrumental role for individual animals, whose status does not differ substantially from that of plants, rivers, rocks, or soil."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac; with Essays on Conservation from Round River*, 262.

<sup>102</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 23.

Grounded in Leopold's land ethic, Callicott insists that what he articulates is not really about what is in the best interests of humans, neglecting what is better for "nonhuman natural entities." Although he acknowledges that humans may have the task of assessing the value of the biotic community because humans possess a "morally and aesthetically sensitive consciousness," Callicott insists that a compelling land ethic values nonhuman nature for more than its usefulness to humans.<sup>103</sup> Further, a land ethic must assign humans value with the same framework, according to the same standards: "The land ethic manifestly does not accord equal moral worth to each and every member of the biotic community; the moral worth of individuals (including, take note, human individuals) is relative, to be assessed in accordance with the particular relation of each to the collective entity which Leopold called 'land.'"<sup>104</sup>

Callicott's work also pulls from deep ecology, a school of thought which emerged in the same era as the eco-justice movement was forming, taking shape in the 1970s.<sup>105</sup> Philosopher Arne Naess coined the term "deep ecology" in 1973. Naess argued that it is not appropriate or accurate to speak of how an organism interacts with its environment, since an organism and its context are inseparable. An "*organism is interaction*. Organisms and milieu are not two things – if a mouse were lifted into an absolute vacuum, it would no longer be a mouse. Organisms presuppose milieu." Naess asserted

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<sup>103</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 26.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>105</sup> Some eco-justice scholars, such as J. Richard Engel, whose work I discuss in Chapter 1, explicitly draw on deep ecology. See, for example Engel, "Democracy, Christianity, Ecology."

that this inextricable link between organism and milieu applies to all creatures, even humans.<sup>106</sup>

Deep ecology, writes environmental political scientist Andy Scerri, “prioritised answering one ontological question in particular: what should take precedence, the parts or the whole?”<sup>107</sup> In deep ecology, human society is just one part of nature, which is a “unitary ‘whole’ that ethical individual humans are obliged to experience and understand as a seamless moral continuum.”<sup>108</sup> Humans are meant to develop an “ecological consciousness,” adopting an ethic where humans live as “‘un-alienated’ moral actors within the ecosphere.”<sup>109</sup> Holism, Scerri writes, “is premised upon the immersive view that the ecosphere be treated as a complex whole, provisionally, experientially and with precaution, because ‘everything is connected to everything else.’<sup>110</sup> Since everything is connected, the ecosystem cannot be understood only by examining individual parts. One cannot look at humans, animals, plants, or the land in isolation. The ecosphere is a whole, and should be treated as a whole.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, ed. and trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56.

<sup>107</sup> Andy Scerri, "Deep Ecology, the Holistic Critique of Enlightenment Dualism, and the Irony of History," *Environmental Values* 25, no. 5 (2016/10/01 2016): 533, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327116X14703858759053>.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 536.

<sup>111</sup> I address Peterson’s critique of deep ecology below in this chapter.

Immersed in the land ethic and deep ecology philosophy, Callicott writes extensively on animals. He declares that in a holistic land ethic, non-sentient aspects of nature could potentially be considered more valuable than individual sentient animals:

[In] environmental ethics, plants are included within the parameters of the ethical theory as well as animals. Indeed, inanimate entities such as oceans and lakes, mountains, forest, and wetlands are assigned a greater value than individual animals and in a way quite different from systems which accord them moral considerability through a further multiplication of competing individual loci of value and holders of rights.<sup>112</sup>

Callicott is clear that animals are most valuable not in their own right, but because they contribute to the stability and overall integrity of the biotic community. For animals, those in fewer number might be more valuable than those with more plentiful populations, and those whom Callicott finds more “critically important to the economy of nature” might be more valuable than those who seem less useful, because some animals have a greater impact on the ecosystem as a whole than others.<sup>113</sup>

Theoretically, Callicott includes humans as equals with other creatures in the biotic community, although notably he does not make the same claims about the value of humans weighed against non-sentient nature. He insists that in his holistic framework, “... not only are other sentient creatures members of the biotic community and subordinate to its integrity, beauty, and stability; so are *we*.”<sup>114</sup> This subjugation of humans to the larger biotic community does not mean, however, supporting intentional “human diebacks” to lessen the human population in the same way a land ethic supports

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<sup>112</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

culling of animal populations, a view some critics like to assign to deep ecology philosophy. “Prior moral sensibilities and obligations attendant upon and correlative to prior strata of social involvement remain operative and preemptive,” Callicott declares.<sup>115</sup> Human membership in human communities means that humans can advocate for human cares in a way that might seem to give humans preferential place in the biotic community.

Callicott gives significant attention not only to the place of nonhuman animals in ecological holism, but he also directly addresses the animal rights movement and the problems he sees with focusing on the rights on individual animals, as I shared above. Callicott takes on a query of Regan’s that exemplifies for Callicott the pitfalls of such an approach. Regan writes,

The implications of the successful development of a rights-based environmental ethic, one that made the case that individual inanimate objects (e.g. *this* redwood) have inherent value and a basic moral right to treatment respectful of that value, should be welcomed by environmentalists ... A rights-based environmental ethic remains a live option, one that, though far from being established, merits continued exploration ... Were we to show proper respect for the rights of individuals who make up the biotic community, would not the *community* be preserved?<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>116</sup> Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 362-63. Callicott did seek a kind of “reconciliation” with the animal rights movement. In a 1988 follow up essay, he reports that his “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair” essay evoked “an increasingly acrimonious divorce between individualistic animal welfare ethics and holistic ecocentric ethics,” a division he called “regrettable because it is divisive,” making it hard to address the “overlapping concerns” of both groups. He points to signs of reconciliation from some animal rights ethicists, although he points primarily to Mary Anne Warren, a scholar known for a “weak animal rights” perspective that mostly aligns with a holist philosophy, as a sign of progress, while continuing to assert his disagreements with Regan. See J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again,” *Between the Species* 4, no. 3 (1988): 163-64. Regan seems to spend little time responding to Callicott, just briefly mention Callicott’s views, for example, in his 2001 book *Defending Animal Rights*. Regan notes that critics of animal rights like Callicott inaccurately claim that animal activists support interrupting prey animals in nature. Elsewhere, he simply mentions Callicott for his views on environmental crises. Tom Regan, *Defending Animal Rights* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 8, 19-20.

To Regan's question, Callicott answers a resounding, "No." The rights of the individual non-human creature cannot be considered in such a way:

Nature ... is not fair; it does not respect the rights of individuals. To attempt to safeguard the rights of each and every individual member of an ecosystem would, correspondingly, be to attempt to stop practically all trophic processes beyond photosynthesis - and even then we would somehow have to deal ethically with the individual life-threatening and hence rights-violating competition among plants for sunlight. An ethic for the preservation of nature, therefore, could hardly get off on the right foot if, at the start, it condemns as unjust and immoral the trophic asymmetries lying at the heart of evolutionary and ecological processes. An environmental ethic cannot be generated, as it were by an invisible hand, from a further extension of rights (on the basis of some yet-to-be-worked-out-theory) to "individual inanimate objects."<sup>117</sup>

Despite his blunt rejection of Regan's ethics, he does still seek a way to embrace a version of animal rights he can approve. Drawing on the work of animal rights philosophers Mary Midgley (discussed more in Chapter 5) and Peter Singer, Callicott supports the concept of "nested communities," where each micro-community has its own structure, members, and accompanying moral requirements.<sup>118</sup> Humans have obligations to their immediate families, for example, that differ from those to the wider community. Extrapolating from this analogy, Callicott finds that his ideal "animal welfare ethic of the mixed [human-animal] community, thus, would not censure using [barnyard or] draft animals for work or even slaughtering meat animals for food so long as the keeping and using of such animals was not in violation - as factory farming clearly is - of a kind of

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<sup>117</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 51.

<sup>118</sup> Midgley's most notable work: Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984). Midgley was an ecofeminist philosopher who wrote a number of works focusing on animal ethics, arguing that philosophy had not been attending enough to the role of the animal in the larger world. I reference Midgley in Chapter 5.

evolved and unspoken social contract between man and beast.”<sup>119</sup> Factory farming is morally repugnant to a holist philosophy, but using animals for labor or food in “humane” conditions simply represents the ways humans and domesticated animals live together in communities of mutual support.

Domesticated animals, continues Callicott, represent a challenge to holism’s ethos because in some way they exist outside the bounds of nature. *Domestic* animals are *not* a part of his vision of a balanced ecosystem. Although he rejects the cruelty of factory farming, he explicitly critiques the animal rights movement’s concern for domestic animals, declaring that domestic animals are as “natural” as furniture:

One of the more distressing aspects of the animal liberation movement is the failure of almost all its exponents to draw a sharp distinction between the very different plights (and rights) of wild and domestic animals. But this distinction lies at the very center of the land ethic. Domestic animals are creations of man. They are living artifacts, but artifacts nevertheless, and they constitute yet another mode of extension of the works of man into the ecosystem. From the perspective of the land ethic a herd of cattle, sheep, or pigs is as much or more a ruinous blight on the landscape as a fleet of four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles. There is thus something profoundly incoherent (and insensitive as well) in the complaint of some animal liberationists that the "natural behavior" of chickens and baby calves is cruelly frustrated on factory farms. It would make almost as much sense to speak of the natural behavior of tables and chairs.<sup>120</sup>

Callicott imagines the plight domesticated animals would face if freed, describing them as unfit for survival outside of (and because of generations of) human intervention.<sup>121</sup> He also takes on abolitionist animal rights arguments, tracing various potential outcomes of a

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<sup>119</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 56.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

society deciding to stop using animals for food. Every outcome he foresees is a disaster for both humans and animals.<sup>122</sup> “A vegetarian human population is ... *probably* ecologically catastrophic,” he concludes, because he suspects that the whole food chain would be disrupted, ultimately resulting in an increase in the population of human beings and a decrease in the number of animal beings, which would tax the earth’s resources too much.<sup>123</sup> He describes other ecologically harmful practices he associates with vegetarianism, like the use of chemicals in fertilizers and preservatives that herbivore humans must ostensibly rely on to meet their dietary needs.<sup>124</sup> A land ethic, though, as he envisions and as he draws from Leopold’s work, provides for the rights of “nonhuman natural beings” as part of the larger ecosystem.

While Callicott supports working to reduce factory farming, because of its environmentally harmful practices, he rejects any other calls to eliminate animal meat from human diets. Like Leopold, he prioritizes first getting “meat from God” through hunting and gathering, with small scale personal farming as a second choice option, and buying or bartering for organic foods as a third choice.<sup>125</sup> Those involved in the “humane movement,” a term Callicott uses for the animal rights movement, “seem at bottom to betray a world-denying or rather a life-loathing philosophy. The natural world as actually

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 35. Callicott bases his conclusions on chain of events which include an increase in food sources for humans because of a shift to plant-based eating, which would in turn expand the human population because of the abundance of plant-based food resources, which would in turn lead to overuse of resources like trees for building additional shelters, and overused topsoil to grow more plants.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 36-37. Such chemicals and fertilizers are also used abundantly to sustain the demand for meat from farmed animal agriculture.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 36.

constituted is one in which one being lives at the expense of others.” For Callicott, it is animal rights activists, not environmentalists, who do not understand the persistence and self-preservation of life in the natural world. It is animal rights activists who are “uncourageous” in their tactics, because they have “attempted to exempt themselves from the life/death reciprocities of natural processes and ecological limitations in the name of a prophylactic ethic of maximizing rewards (pleasure) and minimizing unwelcome information (pain).”<sup>126</sup> In Callicott’s view, to be an animal rights activist is to be one who shuns the natural and hides from the reality of pain and mortality.

Callicott nods to the compatibility of his work with eco-justice in his frequent inclusion of Holmes Rolston III in his writings.<sup>127</sup> Rolston, recall, is the scholar on animals chosen by Dieter Hessel and Bill Gibson in their eco-justice anthologies. As I outline in Chapter 1, Rolston suggests that an eco-justice perspective on animals, grounded in scripture, can focus on caring for species of animals in an ecosystem, while being less concerned for individual animals. Rolston’s inclusion in eco-justice volumes suggests that his views at least adequately represent an eco-justice perspective on the role and value of nonhuman animals.) Peterson also points out the similarities between Callicott’s and Rolston’s perspectives, noting that both emphasize that humans should not intervene in nature in order to reduce the suffering of animals. Callicott writes, “if nature as a whole is good, then pain and death are also good.”<sup>128</sup> Rolston’s take is similar: “That [suffering] ought not to continue is a tender sentiment but so remote from the way the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>127</sup> See a notable example in J. Baird Callicott, “Rolston on Intrinsic Value,” *Environmental Ethics* 14, Summer, no. 2 (1992).

<sup>128</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 33.

world *is* that we must ask whether this is the way the world *ought* to be in a tougher, realistic environmental ethic.”<sup>129</sup> Nonhuman animals are an important part of ecosystems – as species that contribute to the balance of the whole. Protecting individual animal rights, aside from lamenting unnecessary cruelties in industrial agricultural systems, represents a breach of integrity in the ecosystem.

Peterson offers criticism of holism, noting that although the tenets of holism are readily applied to the nonhuman world, environmentalists rarely apply the concepts to humans. In other words, holism’s ethic of prioritizing the “greater good” of whole ecosystems over individuals does *not* typically apply to human beings. Although humans are the cause of myriad ecological problems, holist environmentalists do not generally suggest applying the same emphasis on “species only” or “group only” to humans. Individual humans, unlike individual animals, matter in ecological holism, even if the “greater good” is undermined. She concludes, “The reluctance to apply the ‘greater good’ logic to ourselves stems from an acknowledgement that natural selection is an often cruel and arbitrary process.”<sup>130</sup> Peterson calls out Rolston for being “particularly unapologetic” about giving a set-apart place to humans in an “otherwise holistic environmental philosophy.” Nonhuman suffering is unimportant unless it impacts the health of the ecosystem, but humans live not just in nature, but “also in culture,” Rolston insists. Peterson critiques his dualistic framing of a nature/culture divide, saying such an

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<sup>129</sup> Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 58.

<sup>130</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 27.

approach allows him to “avoid the dilemmas” about how holism works with human value.<sup>131</sup>

Ecofeminist philosopher Marti Kheel similarly critiques both holism broadly and Rolston specifically in her 2008 work *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective*. Where Peterson focuses on the “greater good” approach of holism, Kheel addresses what she describes as “masculinist’ concepts of holism, specifically naming Callicott and Leopold alongside Rolston in her critique. Masculinist concepts of holism do not attend adequately to the individual, she charges:

I argue that [masculinist] holist theorists fail to examine the unconscious factors that promote (or discourage) the development of feelings of care and empathy for individual other-than-humans, both within society at large and within their own theories ... I suggest that ... holist philosophers would do well to focus on the task of exploring the social, cultural, and psychological conditions necessary for care to flourish, for individuals as well as the larger “whole.”<sup>132</sup>

She calls holism a kind of stewardship-focused environmentalism that, contrary to its expressed claims, reinforces a “hierarchical worldview in which humans are above the rest of nature, albeit in a kindly, care-taking capacity ... [Holist] philosophers have promoted a socially acceptable context for the expression of aggression toward individual (other-than-human) beings.”<sup>133</sup> Kheel points out Leopold’s fascination with sport hunting as an example of the aggressive, masculinist, sacrifice-oriented framework that undermines the more compelling claims of holism. “Leopold’s view on sport hunting

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>132</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 16.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

reduced other-than-human animals to psychological props in a drama that reinforced the manly virtues,” she writes.<sup>134</sup>

Kheel also devotes an entire chapter to examining the work of ecojustice thinker Holmes Rolston III. He, too, she writes, relies on a hierarchy of being that prioritizes humans as having the most intrinsic value, despite his claims of rejecting anthropocentrism.<sup>135</sup> Kheel gathers Rolston’s claims about humans across his writings, pointing out that he labels them as superior to other creatures cognitively, ethically, critically, culturally, and superior in their capacity to love the other.<sup>136</sup> Rolston argues that only humans can understand the divine creativity of creation, which will inspire them to care for nature. Kheel finds his version of “care” to be lacking in true empathy as he brusquely dismisses those who *do* care for “other-than-human animals.”<sup>137</sup> Kheel brings attention to the limitations of Rolston’s theology, and the way his perspectives narrow possibilities for care, seeing animals as diminished centers of moral worth. Her

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 129. Kheel writes extensively on Leopold’s relationship with hunting, contrasting both his well-known essay, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” where Leopold reflects on whether or not to shoot a wolf, with Leopold’s continued hunting practices throughout his life, his work in game management, and his focus on controlling populations of predator animals. Kheel argues that Leopold’s essay, where he writes movingly about the green light of wolf’s eyes, implies that he has had a change of heart about hunting, which she calls a myth cultivated to imply his mature ecological worldview. See *ibid.*, 112-16; Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac; with Essays on Conservation from Round River*.

<sup>135</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 141. Although Kheel engages with many of Rolston’s works, her primary attention is on his book *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Intriguingly, Rolston suggests that the “Golden Rule” should be applied to the differences he notes between his environmental ethic “built on natural ecosystems” and ethics built on animal rights. He cites Tom Regan as the best representation of animal rights ethics, but, unsurprisingly, points to Callicott as the best source to separate the concerns of animal rights from environmental ethics. Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics*, 113, 42, 357.

<sup>136</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 143.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 155. Kheel cites Rolston’s claim that “those who sympathize with the pains of animals and wish to eliminate these pains are not biologically sensitive but insensitive.” He continues, “Pain is a pervasive fact of life, not to be wished away by a kindly ethic either in natural systems or in cultural overlays of these systems.” Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics*, 60.

evaluation makes more transparent why a holistic philosophy implicitly undergirding the eco-justice movement's understanding of nonhuman animals results in problematic anthropocentrism.

Kheel does more than challenge holism, though. She likewise faults animal rights scholars like Singer and Regan, finding in their equally masculinist approaches a strange unity with holism that the scholars themselves have not articulated. She accuses Singer and Regan of belittling empathy and care as important components of ethical consideration for nonhuman animals, and of adopting a competitive and masculinist approach that is willing to sacrifice the well-being of some for chosen others.<sup>138</sup> Dissatisfied, then, with both animal rights *and* holist approaches to nonhuman animals, Kheel sets out to articulate an ecofeminist holism that “transcends neither individual beings nor feelings of care and empathy,” but rather embraces an approach that cultivates space for care in ways that lead to transformation, an approach which I examine in Chapter 5.<sup>139</sup>

Peterson, too, faults the animal rights ideology along with holist environmentalism, blaming both schools of thought for the disconnect between movements, saying that both groups embrace the dichotomy that “the environment is about wholes, such as ecosystems and species, and that animal welfare is about individuals.”<sup>140</sup> Both groups believe that concern for one (ecosystems or entire species)

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<sup>138</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 18-19. Kheel refers to scenarios in which Singer or Regan would choose to prioritize humans over animals or where beings are prioritized in relationship to intelligence and sentience.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>140</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 7.

conflicts with concern for the other (individual animals). Peterson argues that this ideological divide far exceeds animal rights and environmentalism, and indeed reflects a deeply ingrained aspect of Western social thought around concepts of individuals and wholes.<sup>141</sup> Thus, animals are almost completely subordinated to the tenets of holism in environmental ethics, while the principles of holism are almost entirely neglected in animal rights discussions.<sup>142</sup> The “all or nothing” approach of both holist philosophy and animal rights shuts off the potential for conversation and collaboration, relying on binary thinking that eliminates the kind of creativity needed for a renewed eco-justice theoethic.

Peterson calls the dispute between environmental ethics and animal ethics, both of which have a range of articulations, a matter of scale, since scholars in both wide disciplines agree that animals do have intrinsic value. Both holism and animal ethics have dualistic perspectives when it comes to individuals and wholes, she argues, leading each group to dismiss the concerns of the other.<sup>143</sup> Most animal rights ethicists locate the scale of intrinsic value in the individual creature, “either because of care about what happens to [animals] or because animals are similar to human in morally relevant ways,” while holism emphasizes value in the community.<sup>144</sup>

Emphasizing the inherent value of all creation, Peterson offers an avenue for reconciliation between environmentalism and animal ethics, whereby both schools of thought could “stand together in a direct challenge to the deep humanism of the Western

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 61.

tradition.”<sup>145</sup> Models of reconciliation between the two schools of thought probe the theoretical differences between environmental and animal ethics.<sup>146</sup> Environmental law expert Werner Scholtz, for instance, offers an attempt at reconciliation as he examines the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which is a United Nations treaty established at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit that articulates a commitment to conserving global biodiversity.<sup>147</sup> While Scholtz finds the CBD to favor holistic perspectives at the expense of the rights of animals, particularly wild animals, he calls for an approach that centers the “non-exclusionary dignity” of humans and animals and works toward “universal justice” for both humans and animals.<sup>148</sup> Peterson lifts up the work of environmental philosopher Paul Taylor, praising his framework that establishes environmental concern not from a holistic point of view, but rather from “concern for individuals, multiplied.” For Taylor, destruction of the ecosystem is wrong because it is the home of so many moral subjects, each of which has moral worth.<sup>149</sup> Taylor’s perspective is compelling, offering obvious connection points with a rights perspective like Regan’s, with its “subject-of-a-life” framing. Centering the moral worth of each subject in ecosystems

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 32. Peterson suggests that reconciliation between holistic environmental ethics and animal ethics is possible since the philosophical division between holism and animal rights often does not translate into the same divisions for the “everyday” person. Often, she points out, “animal lovers” and “nature lovers” exist in deeply overlapping categories.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 142-43.

<sup>147</sup> See the Convention’s website at <https://www.cbd.int/>.

<sup>148</sup> Werner Scholtz, “International (Wild) Animal Rights and Biodiversity: Resolving Conflicts Between Holism And Individualism,” *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy* 27, no. 2 (2024/04/02 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2024.2428003>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13880292.2024.2428003>.

<sup>149</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 151. Peterson draws on Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

blends holist and animal rights ideals, valuing community and each member in the community.

Could a *theoethical* approach reframe the conflict between holism and animal rights? Building on the possible connections between animal rights and holist environmentalism, Peterson suggests that theological framings of the value of people, animals, and the wider creation are important, since they are neither human-centric, nature-centric, or animal-centric but instead are theo-centric, God-centric.<sup>150</sup> Returning to the animal rights movement, I examine Christian perspectives on the place of animals in creation in the next section.

### Christian Perspectives on Animal Rights

Although most Christian framings of animal theoethics certainly meet the basic Peterson's quest for a theo-centric valuing of animals, not all perspectives can work to reconcile the tensions between holism and animal rights. To serve as a bridge that can lead to a more robust eco-justice that better values nonhuman animals, Christian perspectives on animal rights eschew a view the world that positions humans above all other creatures. Shaped by an embrace of Platonic dualisms and Enlightenment thinking, much of Western Christianity in the last several centuries has interpreted the concept of dominion expressed in Genesis Chapter 1 as prioritizing the needs of the human over the rest of creation and granting humans the right to treat animals and other parts of creation

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<sup>150</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 155.

as resources for human use.<sup>151</sup> Some conservative Christian animal activists write from such a perspective, advocating care for animals as part of our human duty towards those who are of lower status in creation. Matthew Scully, for example, writes for a conservative Christian audience, with work grounded in a hierarchical understanding of the concept of dominion that emphasizes human responsibility for and *over* nonhuman animals.<sup>152</sup> In his 2003 work *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, Scully notes that “Human beings love animals as only the higher love the lower, the knowing love the innocent, and the strong love the vulnerable.” Further, humans can be commended for loving these “lower” creatures. Loving animals “speaks well of us” because caring for animals is “part of our humanity.”<sup>153</sup>

Scully has a clear picture of what human dominion over animals should be. He rejects “dominion only of power,” where God is not at the center. No matter how much “man might relish his lordship over the beasts,” empathy must persist.<sup>154</sup> While nonhuman animals “cannot draw higher meanings” from their suffering, Scully argues, humans can learn from nonhuman animal experiences, and see in animals’ desire to escape from suffering “our own deepest yearnings for deliverance.”<sup>155</sup> Since our human

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<sup>151</sup> Clough, *On Animals: Vol. I*, 13-14. Clough’s work provides other examples of Platonic and Enlightenment thinking influencing Christianity’s understanding of nature, creation, dominion, and animals throughout *On Animals*.

<sup>152</sup> Scully, as mentioned above, is a Republican speechwriter, most notably for George W. Bush. He has not written much about animals outside of this work, but *Dominion* gained some notoriety when it was published, since it was published during Bush’s presidency. Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

“powers” are unique, Scully writes, “it would follow too that our ethical obligations are unique” from those of nonhuman animals. Humans can inflict great suffering on others, capable of “moral degradation” in ways that animals are not. Humans, then, have a responsibility of care and compassion.<sup>156</sup>

Scully is very committed to the well-being of animals - he includes several chapters of recommendations for how various kinds of animals should be treated, including specific policy recommendations and legal recommendations for the U.S. context.<sup>157</sup> Scully has no interest, however, in troubling a sharp human/animal dichotomy; indeed, his theological perspective on dominion is built on maintaining these distinct roles for humans and animals. Care for animals emerges from the responsibility humans feel from their dominant position in creation’s hierarchy. Scully contends that the animal rights movement misses the mark, trying to make humans and animals into equals.<sup>158</sup> While Scully echoes other animal rights activists who take pains to emphasize that they see humans and animals as different, in Scully’s theological perspective, he is sure to position humans clearly above animals.

Scully makes no attempt to wade into a conflict between caring for individual animals verses caring for species. These distinctions are not part of his theological

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>157</sup> Scully outlines his ideal “Humane Farming Act,” for example. 392.

<sup>158</sup> Scully writes that “animal advocates sometimes speak a language of liberation bearing little resemblance to the world that animals actually inhabit, or to our own for that matter. Dogs and elephants and pigs are not just so many interest groups barking and trumpeting and grunting to have their demands met and liberation granted.” He says that while he appreciate those who consider the rights of animals, they “miss a crucial point by assuming that to be cared for a creature must somehow be made our equal, which isn’t even true in our human affairs, where often those we love are the weak and vulnerable.” Scully, *Dominion*, 20.

framework. Although Scully's approach is God-centric, he does not meet Peterson's hope that a theological approach to animals will help bridge the divide between animal rights and environmental holism. Further, Scully's perspective, though valuable to help conservative evangelicals think more deeply about compassion for animals, does not help frame a strong eco-justice theoethic. His framework is built on notions of dominion that the eco-justice movement rejects as problematic, meaning the way Scully thinks about animals only increases, rather than decreases, the place of problematic anthropocentrism.

British Anglican clergyperson and theologian Andrew Linzey has been one of the most prolific scholars writing about a Christian animal rights perspective, offering a theologically centrist perspective on animals. He, like Regan and Callicott, emerged as a leader in his field in the 1970s.<sup>159</sup> Linzey takes care to contradict the myth that animal activism is a "pagan" endeavor, which he uses to mean "secular." While animal rights advocates come from a variety of religious perspectives, including those who hold no religious belief, Linzey and others believe that humans have a "God-given power" to exercise a "special care for the weak and vulnerable – of all species."<sup>160</sup> For Linzey, humans owe care to animals because all of creation is a gift of God's generosity and has "irreducible value." Creation has worth because God gives creation worth. God values all

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<sup>159</sup> Linzey has written or edited more than twenty books on animal rights and authored hundreds of articles on the subjects, several of which are cited in this work.

<sup>160</sup> Andrew Linzey, "Beyond Caricature: Preface to the Columbia University Press Edition," in *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Paul Barry Clarke (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xxvii.

of creation.<sup>161</sup> Linzey describes his theology as a rejection of anthropocentricity in favor of theocentricity. Animals do not exist for the sake of humans, but for the sake of God.<sup>162</sup>

Linzey acknowledges that Christianity has been “deeply anthropocentric,” assuming that God is only interested in humans, granting them “*absolute* rights” over creation, including animals.<sup>163</sup> He laments a misunderstanding of the concept of dominion as some kind of “despotism,” suggesting that humans have forgotten that their “lordship” over creation is dependent on God.<sup>164</sup> Instead, following the example of Christ, humans’ authority over animals must take the form of self-giving service.<sup>165</sup>

Linzey outlines his understanding of animal rights, building on Tom Regan’s work, even repeating Regan’s “environmental fascism” language, responding to the argument some make that ignoring the rights of animals can be justified for the sake of conservation for all:

In other words, for the good of the species, some individuals within it may legitimately suffer deprivation or harm or both ... Such a view, as Tom Regan indicates, might be labelled ‘environmental fascism’. It implies that ‘the individual may be sacrificed for the greater biotic good’, and if the rights of animals can be thus traded away, what prospect might there be for human beings?

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<sup>161</sup> Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK Press, 1987), 8-9.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

Linzey both rejects common theological arguments against valuing animals, and a wholesale adoption of secular framings of rights, and instead articulates what he calls “theo-rights.” Theo-rights are “concerned with the defence of God-given spiritual capacities exhibited within his creation and realized through his covenant relationship with them, and not with any capacities which may be claimed by the creature itself in defence of its own status.”<sup>167</sup> Theo-rights come from God, not from the creature itself, whether human or animal.

Like Scully, Linzey’s animal ethic is certainly theo-centric; unlike Scully, his work is grounded in an understanding of dominion that does not rely on seeing humans as superior in every way to nonhuman animals. As mentioned, Linzey aligns himself with Regan’s approach against species-focused approaches to animals, and although he includes several resources related to environmentalism on his suggested reading list, he makes no attempt of his own to address animals in the context of ecological concerns, limiting his possible contributions to a revised eco-justice theoethic.<sup>168</sup> His animal rights theology is compelling, but he makes no attempt to unravel the human-animal binary in some religions that Gross describes.

Other Christian animal rights perspectives offer more compelling arguments for why an eco-justice theoethic should better consider the place of every animal in its moral framework.<sup>169</sup> British Methodist theologian David Clough begins his *On Animals Vol. 2*

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 185-91. Linzey’s annotated list includes titles like John Passmore’s *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (1974), Jürgen Moltmann’s *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (1985), and John Cobb’s *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (1972).

<sup>169</sup> David Clough and Christopher Carter, both Methodist clergy, are well-suited to serve as examples of Christian animal theoethics that can contribute to a stronger place for animals in an eco-justice framework in mainline Protestantism. There are other important voices in Christian animal rights advocacy,

*Theological Ethics* by intentionally addressing what a theological animal ethic can accomplish that a secular approach cannot. He reviews several ethical approaches such as Peter Singer’s utilitarian ethics, the animal rights theory of Tom Regan, the ecofeminist grounding of Carol Adams, and Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach.<sup>170</sup> For Clough, none of these frameworks are “individually sufficient.” A Christian animal ethic is “methodologically pluralistic” in relation to those he examines.<sup>171</sup> Clough shows where each of the secular approaches falls short of his vision. For example, Singer’s utilitarian approach “fails to recognize that our duties toward other animals ... are not exhausted in our responsibility to act benevolent towards them.”<sup>172</sup> Clough enumerates what he sees as the special contributions of a Christian animal ethic: for a *theological* animal ethics, the killing of animals is a *prima facie* concern, regardless of whether or not an animal suffers before its death. A Christian animal ethic is also “realistic” about the fallen nature of creation, acknowledging how creatures are impacted by our departure from “patterns of divine ordering.”<sup>173</sup> Clough suggests that a theological animal ethic pays particular attention to a teleological view of the animal, questioning “what a creature *is for* and the particular pattern of life in which that creature will flourish,” work that involves seeking

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however, including ecofeminist philosopher Clare Palmer and others, whose work I address in Chapter 5 as I emphasize the potential contribution of ecofeminism in shaping an eco-justice theoethic. Other important contributions to the expanding consideration of animals by Christian thinkers can be found in two excellent edited volumes: Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, eds., *Creaturely Theology: God, Humans, and Other Animals* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Waldau and Patton, *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*.

<sup>170</sup> Clough, *On Animals: Vol. II*, 4.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

to understand the “thisness” of every creature, and seeking to understand the identity of every creature.<sup>174</sup> Animals can be described in theologically meaningful ways: as covenant partners, as neighbors, as belonging to “the poor” or “the oppressed,” and even as moral exemplars.<sup>175</sup> For Clough, there are areas of concern for animals that only a theological perspective can address sufficiently.

Clough accomplishes the kind of project he describes in part by writing a relatively orthodox systematic theology in *On Animals Vol. 1: Systematic Theology*, along with his ethics-focused volume, working through the major themes of creation, reconciliation, and redemption. Clough makes use of Linzey’s well-researched works, citing Linzey frequently, although typically in the footnotes of his *On Animals Vol. 1 Systematic Theology*.<sup>176</sup> While Clough clearly respects Linzey’s contributions, Clough’s approach emphasizes unraveling the dominant Western Enlightenment worldview concerning the place of animals. Throughout his work, he examines scripture and Christian theological heritage, correcting what he sees as inaccurate interpretations of the biblical texts pertaining to animals, and arguing that the perspectives of even very anthropocentric theologians, when followed to their conclusions, in fact support a vision of Christianity that includes animals as part of God’s reconciled and redeemed creation. “God has called human beings to be creatures in a particular way and take responsibility

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 23. What Clough describes resonates with an ecofeminist methodology of listening to the Other which I discuss in Chapter 5.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>176</sup> See an example in Clough, *On Animals: Vol. 1*, xiv, fn 6. Clough points out that Linzey is one of a few theologians who has consistently attended to questions about the place of animals in God’s work of creation, reconciliation and redemption, citing at least five of Linzey’s work that attend to these doctrinal questions.

for the lives of other creatures,” Clough says, not conflating humans and animals, but instead arguing for understanding the difference as *vocational* rather than ontological.<sup>177</sup>

By regarding our human identity as a vocational task, Clough both avoids minimizing human/animal difference *and* avoids treating humans and animals as wholly disconnected in moral and theological worth. Clough takes seriously the question of the moral value of animals, asking, for example, whether sin is a uniquely human trait, and arguing that certainly *all* creatures suffer as a result of human corruption.<sup>178</sup> Clough also considers the spiritual lives of animals, imagining the unique ways animals participate in praising God, and what redemption might look like for animals.<sup>179</sup> Clough’s full consideration of the moral value of each animal life, grounded in a carefully articulated systematic theology, makes his work an important resource for an eco-justice theoethic that better includes animals. He provides a rich theological framework, embedded in valued Christian tradition, that shows how individual animals are important to God, and need to be important in our theoethical considerations as well.

Finally, I turn to the work of Methodist theologian Christopher Carter, whose ecowomanist and decolonial animal ethic holds the potential to achieve the challenge, as Peterson has called for, to an animal rights/ecological holism divide. Like Clough, Carter writes with considerable attention to Western Enlightenment constructions of the human.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>178</sup> Clough shares a particularly vivid example drawn from Jane Goodall’s work with chimpanzees of a chimpanzee that seemed to be engaging in intentional and brutal infanticide of other chimp’s newborns. Goodall’s devoted engagement to learning about the lives of chimpanzees is an example of transspecies listening, an ecofeminist practice that I explore more in Chapter 5. Ibid., 107-15.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. Clough attends to these topics throughout his work, but Chapter 7, “The Shape of Redeemed Living,” gives more sustained attention to the question of what redemption may be like for animals.

Where Clough mines some of the most revered theological voices of the Western Enlightenment, however, seeking to retrieve a reworked theological framework that can meaningfully attend the moral worth of animals, Carter centers the experiences and wisdom of Black women in relationship to racialization and animalization.<sup>180</sup> While Clough aims for a systematic theology, Carter's work is contextual, paying attention to race, what it means to be human, and how the oppression of humans and animals are inextricably linked, drawing on his own experiences. Carter writes with the assumption that "the nonhumans who occupy the world are active agents, expressing themselves within the broader earth community." As a Black theologian who "[knows] what it feels like to be silenced," Carter seeks to explore the "obvious connection between Black and nonhuman animal invisibility."<sup>181</sup> Thus, Carter writes about how the human/animal binary produces damaging racialization and animalization. As a result of coloniality, the concept of "human" has been a "projection of the fantastic white hegemonic imagination," where "human" really means "white man." Carter's decolonial project is to delink the concept of "human" from whiteness and maleness.<sup>182</sup> In a Western Christian theological anthropology, beings are either a part of society or a part of nature, which are construed as stark opposites. One is either "a human fit for society, or ... a savage who must be ... eliminated ... or abandoned."<sup>183</sup> Colonialism and chattel slavery reinforced

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<sup>180</sup> Carter's interlocutors include Black ecofeminist scholars Aph and Syl Ko, and I draw on their work both in the Introduction and more fully in Chapter 5.

<sup>181</sup> Christopher Carter, "Prophetic Labrador: Expanding (Black) Theology by Overcoming Invisibility of Animal Life and Death," in *Feeling Animal Death: Being Host to Ghosts*, ed. Ashley King and Brienne Donaldson (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2019), 92.

<sup>182</sup> Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food*, 88.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

the understanding that white Christian men are closest to God and Africans, Indigenous Americans, and other considered non-white are “too close to nature,” “like animals,” and farther from God.<sup>184</sup> Carter makes clear that he is not conflating the oppression of humans and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Rather, he demonstrates that it is the same colonial system of white supremacy, the same dualistic, hierarchical value system of “humanity” that reifies both racialization and animalization. When someone disparages a group of people as “animals” or labels them as animalistic, they are saying that the group of people is not “normal,” that they do not meet the standard of the white Euro-centric norms - the ideal human. This implies that whatever groups of people do not meet the standard of “normal human” can be treated “like animals.” If animals are discounted through a theological perspective that values them only as tools for humans to use as they will, then animalized groups of people are also discounted under the same system.<sup>185</sup>

Like Clough, Carter suggests focusing on the task set before us as humans to reorient our relationship to animals. We must *practice* being human, he argues, learning to deconstruct racism, sexism, and ecologically extractive thinking and instead engage a decolonial ethic.<sup>186</sup> To do this work, he offers three theological calls: First, humans must remind themselves that since they are created in God’s image, they are called to self-love. Second, humans should strive for solidarity in human-human, human-nature, and human-

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 94. Carter’s work here draws on a rich cadre of scholarship from Black liberation theology and ecowomanism, including religion scholar J. Kameron Carter, womanist ethicist Emilie. M. Townes, philosopher Franz Fanon, and, as mentioned, Aph and Syl Ko.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 98.

divine relationships that “mirror the life and teachings of Jesus” who was in solidarity with the marginalized. Finally, all life, “human and otherwise” is holistically interdependent, unable to flourish without the other. Thus, humans have a vocation from God to care for the earth.<sup>187</sup>

Carter’s theo-centric ethic values humans, animals, and the earth in ways that do not pit them against each other. Instead, employing a decolonial and “liberative theological anthropology,” Carter calls for ecologically-minded humans who seek out the well-being of humans and animals as an expression of embodying the image of God in the world.<sup>188</sup> Carter’s work speaks well to the eco-justice framework in several ways. Carter clearly lifts the importance of the work of racial justice and the absolute sacred worth of human life. At the same time, his compelling narrative of the intersections of racialization and animalization, accompanied by his concrete strategies for “practicing” being human, which include veganism and environmental advocacy, frames animal lives as an essential part of a theoethic. I think Carter’s work resonates with the stated values of the eco-justice movement, while pushing eco-justice theoethics to realize missing connections that see how animals are *already* part of the exploitative systems that eco-justice seeks to address.

## Conclusions

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>188</sup> Though Carter and Clough align in some ways, they do not always agree. Carter, for example, pushes back on Clough’s expansion of the concept of *imago Dei* as a theological concept applicable to all creatures. Carter argues that the concept of the image of God is best interpreted as “uniquely human.” Christopher Carter, “The Imago Dei as the Mind of Christ,” *Zygon* 49, no. 3 (2014/09/01 2014), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12117>.

Although I argue for the importance of animals for a more robust, authentic eco-justice theoethic, the animal rights movement, in both its theoretical foundations and its strategic and ethical praxis, conflicts with the values of the eco-justice movement in multiple and significant ways. The animal rights movement is often single-issue focused, seemingly unable to acknowledge other perspectives, other justice-struggles, and other movements for liberation, other than to use the experiences of others to better position its own aims. For a movement that seeks to decenter the human and elevate the value of nonhuman animals in society, the animal rights movement is often guilty of an inability to decenter its own aims, even toward the end of partnering with others for common goals. Not only has the movement struggled with entrenched racism and sexism, some in the movement have knowingly, intentionally worked *against* other justice movements when convenient for furthering the cause of animal rights. Finally, just as the mainline traditions that are home to the eco-justice movement sometimes suffer from a muted prophetic voice that cannot escape institutional boundaries, so too the professionalization of animal rights organizations has sometimes led to a diminished sense of identity and purpose. These failings of the animal rights movement present a sizable challenge, explaining, in part, the failure of the movement to connect with eco-justice activism in mainline churches.

At a theoretical level, another deep conflict also suggests an incompatibility between animal rights and the work of eco-justice. Eco-justice theology espouses a holistic environmental framework, one that emphasizes the value of all creation, including nonhuman animals, but one that is concerned for animals only as part of ecosystems, valuable as species, as part of the biotic diversity of the earth. Although

theorists like Callicott express a desire to reconcile with animal rights proponents, holism's core framework simply cannot allow concern for the rights of individual animals to sway its commitment to the biotic community as a whole. Again, the divide between animal rights theory and holistic environmental philosophy results in a barrier to an eco-justice animal ethic. The barrier is not insurmountable, though. The offerings of theologians like David Clough and Christopher Carter create reason for hope.<sup>189</sup> A theologically grounded, ecologically conscious understanding of humans and animals is possible. In an approach that centers on dismantling the hegemonic dualisms, a theoethic that values both humans and animals –as individuals and as part of the web of God's creation – can emerge. Building on the beginnings enabled by a liberative theoethic, I return in Chapter 5 to Carter's work, along with the contributions of ecofeminist animal theorists, to more fully articulate a vision for an eco-justice theoethic with space for moral worth of each animal.

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<sup>189</sup> I include the offerings of ecofeminist theologians, to whom I turn in Chapter 5, in this sense of hope I find for a grounded ecotheology that includes attention to the moral worth of animal lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: ECOFEMINISM AND ECO-JUSTICE  
BUILDING BLOCKS FOR AN ECO-JUSTICE THEOETHIC

“If Jesus could say, ‘Love your enemies,’ surely he would find the much milder statement, ‘Love nature,’ perfectly acceptable. If enemies are to be shown respect and care, should not other lifeforms also, as well as the habitats that support them? ... Christianity is not an easy religion. As counter-cultural, it will make outrageous demands, like ‘Love your enemies’ and ‘Love nature.’” – Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (1997)<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding chapters, I have explained several factors that contribute to an ecojustice theoethic that fails to decenter the human, leaving out of its consideration the moral worth of individual nonhuman animals from its intersectional quest for justice. Despite the seeming conflict and obstacles between the values of animal rights that center the lives and well-being of each animal, and the values of movements like the environmental justice movement, with its emphasis on marginalized human communities, and the ecocentric holist philosophy of eco-justice, which considers animals only as species, benefitting the greater good of the whole ecosystem, I still contend that a path forward remains. I envision an ecojustice theoethic that includes in its intersectional lens justice for individual nonhuman animals, while remaining committed to racial justice, disability justice, gender justice, justice for LGBTQ+ persons, economic justice, and other important justice work. I envision an ecojustice theoethic that can endorse a philosophy of environmental holism that does not swallow individual animals into the whole, while retaining special status for humans. I envision an ecojustice theoethic that

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 41.

challenges the animal rights movement to push beyond its often-narrow inward focus to find a place in the intersecting web of justice work. To begin to en flesh my vision, so that the vision leads to embodied theoethical *praxis*, I turn to ecofeminist scholarship to seek strategies for valuing the spiritual and theological place of nonhuman animals in United Methodist social justice work and in the wider context of mainline Protestant churches. Exploring aspects of ecofeminist care ethics and related approaches, I draw out the themes that can contribute to the unraveling of the anthropocentrism of the ecojustice framework and demonstrate how drawing more-than-human creatures into the web of moral consideration results in a robust and compelling eco-justice theoethic.

Engaging with ecofeminist scholarship serves as rich theoretical ground from which to better address some of the failings of the ecojustice framework, of holist environmental philosophies, and of the animal rights movement. Adopting a framework of ecofeminist thought is not a “fix” for the shortcomings of eco-justice, of environmental holism, or of animal rights; indeed, ecofeminism has already contributed a great deal to the development of these schools of thought. Additionally, ecofeminist perspectives are themselves multifaceted, encompassing widely differing viewpoints, and not all ecofeminists center nonhuman animals in their work or find animals to be an important part of their theory.<sup>2</sup> In ecofeminist theology, philosophy, ethics, and engaged activism, however, some prominent themes of engagement with the more-than-human world provide fertile ground for imagining a better eco-justice theoethic. In this chapter, I

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<sup>2</sup> Ecofeminism has also been criticized for centering the perspectives of White women, and for drawing on wisdom from Black, indigenous, and other minoritized communities without adequate acknowledgement or listening to members of these communities. See more on this topic in Kathi Wilson, "Ecofeminism and First Nations Peoples in Canada: Linking Culture, Gender and Nature," *Gender, Place & Culture* 12, no. 3 (2005/09/01 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690500202574>.

explore multiple ecofeminist themes, bringing them into conversation with the issues I have been raising: anthropocentrism in the ecojustice movement, barriers and potentials in the field of denominational change and social justice movements in mainline Protestantism, narrowly-focused animal rights ideologies, and holistic philosophies that reinscribe human-centered value systems.

### Dismantling Dualisms

I have written in previous chapters about how many religious traditions, especially Western religious traditions, rely heavily on a human/animal binary to define the human as the exceptional subject of the attention of the divine within creation. I have also pointed out how dualistic thinking about the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals creates a problematic anthropocentrism, within ecological holistic philosophy, within ecojustice theoethics, and in turn, in the lived social justice framework and praxis in mainline denominations like The United Methodist Church.

Endeavoring to understand, deconstruct, and reconstruct something greater to replace problematic dualisms is a recurring strain in ecofeminist ethics. Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood outlines the logic of dualism, based on what she calls “the master model.” The Master model is a framework built on cultural assumptions that emphasize a human/nature binary in the Western context, centered on domination by privileged White men as the normative societal baseline.<sup>3</sup> The logic of dualism has five steps: First, the Master is dependent on the other for master status, but seeks to deny this

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<sup>3</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 22-23. Plumwood does not employ capitalization of the Master or the Other in her work; I add it here for emphasis.

dependence and make the other invisible. Second, dualism thrives on hyperseparation, understanding the Other as not only *dissimilar* to the Master, but viewing the Other as an *entirely different* order of being. Third, in a dualistic hierarchy, the Other is only a foil, without an autonomous identity from the Master. Fourth, the interests of the Other are put aside to instead prioritize those of the Master; the Other exists to be a means for the Master's ends. Fifth, the logics of dualism and domination also make ‘the Other’ into a single homogeneous group. Others are “the rest,” flattened to be all alike, rather than viewed as individuals.<sup>4</sup> This logic of domination persists throughout society, particularly in binary-focused Western cultures, making a persistent and pervasive foundation that contributes to hegemonic worldviews that thrive through oppressing the Other.<sup>5</sup>

I have demonstrated a number of ways eco-justice theoethics rely on the problematic Master/Other dualism Plumwood describes. I showed, for example, how often eco-justice legislation in The UMC speaks in detail about the impact of environmental degradation on humans, and then lumps animals, plants, and the land together as “the rest of creation,” making them clearly “other.”<sup>6</sup> From the initial framing of the denomination’s position on animals in the 1972 Social Principles (with its language of “meat animals,” which emphasizes utility to humans), through the decades

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47-55.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Peterson, connecting with Plumwood’s work by focusing direction on linking problematic dualisms to the harm and exploitation of animals, writes that “the first difficulty with acknowledging that we are animals is that it means that we are neither as special nor as separate from the rest of nature as we have thought. The next problem follows from this conclusion: if we are not so different, we ought not to treat other animals as we do. Human exploitation of the other species ... has been justified by the conviction that we are radically Other.” Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 158. I add to Peterson’s claim that anthropocentrism is enmeshed with the dualistic idea that it is acceptable to treat the radically Other in exploitative ways.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2 for specific examples the pattern I describe.

when attentions to animals only took the form of advocacy around endangered species, animals have only been considered as “the rest” of creation, emphasizing their otherness from human animals.

Despite Plumwood’s focus on gender and nature binaries, she insists that ecological feminism must dismantle *all* dualisms, not only those relating to gender. Even though her work focuses on the liberation of women, “women cannot be liberated in isolation.” Dualisms are interwoven around the Master identity - and linking feminism with other anti-oppressive work has “powerful subversive potential.”<sup>7</sup> Decolonial feminist scholar Syl Ko likewise emphasizes the interlocking nature of oppressive dualisms, drawing on decolonial praxis to work towards dismantling harm. Oppressed groups are not simply seeking to redefine humanity, Ko argues, but instead are “changing the conversation around humanity altogether.” The human-animal binary allows colonial understandings of both human and animal to flourish, and so to dismantle colonialism’s oppressive power, the human-animal binary must be challenged. Ko makes clear, though, that challenging the binary does not mean eliminating the concept of humanity altogether. Rather, humanity needs to be “re-enchanted,” “revalued and resignified.”<sup>8</sup> Deconstructing problematic anthropocentrism cannot happen apart from dismantling the animalization of colonized and racialized bodies. Re-enchanting the human is healing work that creates

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<sup>7</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ko, "Revaluing the Human," 117-18. In the Introduction, I outlined the work of some Black ecofeminist and ecowomanist scholars who push back against the way the work of some White scholars conflates humans and animals in an attempt to deconstruct anthropocentrism. Ko’s work addresses this problem as well, arguing that deconstructing racialized concepts of humanity must happen before “re-enchantment.”

space for attending to animals.<sup>9</sup> Justice for animals, while still addressing animals' current material suffering, must include the decolonial work of freeing animals from colonial binaries that are part of the very system that animalizes human bodies.<sup>10</sup>

While deconstructing problematic dualisms is a strong theme among Christian ecotheologians and ecofeminist scholars, deconstruction does not happen by simply favoring the previously neglected or oppressed "side" of a binary relationship. Ecofeminism does not seek to exchange, for example, the societal dominance of men over women in oppressive patriarchal constructions for the opposite, so that women instead rule over men. Ecofeminist theorists Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen point out that ecofeminism also does not seek to "revalue" dualisms so that what was previously considered "lesser" is reinterpreted and elevated to parity with the dominant side of a binary relationship. Instead, the ecofeminist project of deconstructing dualisms means seeking to dismantle the misconceptions that there *are* "sides." Dualisms are "fictitious" constructions, implying an either/or structure, where in reality, a vast fluidity and range exists.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Ko argues that coloniality "tricks us into believing that wherever is the opposite of what currently exists is the 'radical' or 'revolutionary' place to land," but,

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Carter draws on Ko's work in his concept of practicing being human, as I describe in Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ko, "Revaluing the Human," 118. Many more ecofeminists take on the deconstruction of dualisms than I can include in this work. Greta Gaard's approach, for example, attends to the harm done through dualistic constructs, confronting the reality that "even the most marginalized of humans may participate in the Master Model process of instrumentalisation when it comes to nonhuman nature and earth others." Ethicist Lisa Kemmerer argues that both human-animal relationships and human-human relationships are harmed by oppressive dualisms, calling them "untenable," and arguing that that they "impede our ability to relate to the world around us – including one another." Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, 140. Lisa Kemmerer, ed., *Sister Species: Women, Animals, and Social Justice* (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, eds., *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, Second ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2014), 3.

even this “opposite” is a space created by coloniality.<sup>12</sup> Decolonial feminist ethics seek to unravel the threads that hold these opposite spaces together.

Ko’s words resonate with Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* and the persistence of the social order, and Jane Ellen Nickell’s work on how those in leadership in institutions often fail to acknowledge (or want to relinquish) their power over others which I discuss in Chapter 3. Institutions face enormous difficulties in working for lasting social change when the foundational structures and systems remain untouched. Although many progressive United Methodists were thrilled when exclusionary language was finally removed from the *Book of Discipline* at GC 2020/2024, for example, I heard many activists warning that the denomination’s work on justice for queer communities was far from resolved. Without addressing the institutional power structures that enabled the degradation of LGBTQ+ peoples for decades, many fear that no real denominational transformation will take place. Ecofeminist scholarship that seeks to root out and deconstruct sources of oppression that lead to the degradation of bodies can contribute to an eco-justice ethic that pushes for denominational change beyond surface-level shifts and changes in legislative language.

### Ecofeminist Care Ethics

Having portrayed the problems that any enhanced eco-justice framework faces, I turn to ecofeminist care ethics as a helpful source for envisioning such a theoethic. Many ecofeminists offer an ethics of care or related approaches as both a theoretical and

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<sup>12</sup> Ko, "Revaluing the Human," 118. Though Ko does not name it, Christian theology is implicit in much of colonial thought, and contributes to the phenomenon she describes.

methodological praxis for doing the work of dismantling oppressive dualisms and living in community with others – humans *and* earth others. A care ethic is an ethical framework for responsiveness that centers on relationality and attention to the needs of each individual subject. “Care and empathy are at the heart of ecofeminist ethics and allow ecofeminists to solve a variety of problems that other ethical theories can’t” argue Adams and Gruen.<sup>13</sup> Care ethics expand the moral imagination by centering the relationships that shape all beings, a centering that eco-justice theoethics seek to achieve, as I describe in Chapter 1. A feminist care ethic values relationships in part by paying particular attention to the power dynamic in relationships, including relationships between species, such as between humans and other animals, and relationships within species. Care ethics ask what obligations we have to one another, and what capacity each being has to care for themselves and to care for others.<sup>14</sup>

Adams and Gruen emphasize that care ethics are not “feminine” ethics or a “woman’s ethic,” despite critiques leveled at the framework. Care ethics are situated ethics that care for all conditions of injustice.<sup>15</sup> A care ethic can thus be an especially useful framework for ecofeminist animal ethics because care ethics, as Peterson notes, acknowledges that there are “inequalities in power and ability” that shape human-animal relationships. Whereas rights-based ethics focus on “autonomous individuals” and what duties each individual *owes* and is *owed*, and an eco-justice ethic is more concerned about

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<sup>13</sup> Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, "Ecofeminist Footings," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc., 2014), 41-42.

<sup>14</sup> Adams and Gruen, *Ecofeminism*, 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> Adams and Gruen, "Ecofeminist Footings," 39.

whole systems, care ethics acknowledge that not all parties in a relationship may have equal levels of independence, even though they are entitled to justice.<sup>16</sup>

Care ethics also give space for the value of emotions and relationships in the creation of moral and ethical responses. Peterson points out that ecofeminist animal ethics, grounded in care ethics, “make emotions, relationships, histories, and loyalties important for evaluating our obligations to nonhuman animals,” alongside reason-driven theoretical claims.<sup>17</sup> In this, care ethics stand in marked and intentional contrast to other approaches both to animal rights and environmentalism that have eschewed care and emotion as “sentimental.” Ecofeminism problematizes the elevation of reason as the most valuable factor in determining worth. A feminist ethic of care seeks to untangle both emotion and reason from a reason/emotion dualism, valuing sentiment, feeling, and compassion as experience-based strengths. “It is often emotions,” write Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, “that alert us to injustice.”<sup>18</sup>

Ecofeminist theologian Clare Palmer makes specific note of the way an animals-centered care ethic can be linked with Christian praxis. Care ethics center on “an emphasis on the moral emotions; a focus on the ethical significance of particular relationships and a wide range of contextual factors; and attention to the well-being of others.”<sup>19</sup> She uses these building blocks to point to a “Christian relational ethic of care for animals,” grounded in connectedness between humans and animals and in “right

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<sup>16</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Adams and Gruen, *Ecofeminism*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer, “Animals in Christian Ethics,” 176.

relationship.”<sup>20</sup> Sallie McFague’s theology of care stresses that care ethics “[enlarge] the sense of self” in positive ways – “The borders of my self do not stop with my own body: I am, I exist, only as I am in touch with the others, the other subjects who influence me and whom I influence,” she writes.<sup>21</sup> A Christian care ethic, she argues, not only seeks the well-being of community members, but it privileges the well-being of the most “needy” subjects, which might include both “needy nature” and “needy people.”<sup>22</sup> An ecofeminist care ethic, then, can ground a Christian theoethic of regard for nonhuman animals that cherishes relationship with each earth other as a part of a just Christian praxis. In Chapter 3, I touched on the Wesleyan concept of social holiness, a principle that demands that holiness is not only an inner, personal piety, but always includes attention to each other, to the community, as part of Christian discipleship. Working to embody social holiness undergirds the eco-justice movement in The UMC and its expansive quest to link together oppressions and the work of justice that addresses them. Still, an eco-justice theoethic can further push the borders of who is included in the circle of care. Drawing on a Wesleyan theology of connection, a care ethic asks who is still made Other, outside of the attention of the denomination’s structures.

I mentioned above that part of the difficulty of dismantling dualisms that place human animals on one side of a divide and all other animals on the other is unraveling the dualism without implying that all beings are the same, eliminating difference and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>21</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 169-70.

distinctiveness.<sup>23</sup> Care ethics endeavor to address this difficulty by making clear that difference is a *benefit* to deconstructing the logics of domination. Indeed, as ecofeminist and constructive theologian Catherine Keller writes, we must

hold close the realization that the animals that you and I *are* [remains] collectively vibrant only as we recognize our kinship first of all to the nonhuman ones. Across all our wild and entangled differences. Those nonhuman animals mediates the animacy of the nonhuman universe ... to us as also ours. Our own not to own but to join. And to incarnate.

Gruen's care ethic frames this kinship as "entangled empathy." When we direct a "careful empathetic attention" on others, we better understand the "moral experiences" of others, recognizing similarities and differences between us and earth others.<sup>24</sup> A care ethics that attends to nonhuman animals, then, needs to consider the lived experiences of nonhuman animals. In Plumwood's theory, care, solidarity, and friendship overcome what she calls the Self/Other dualism. Recognizing kinship and recognizing difference are both needed in the work of dismantling problematic binaries, essential tasks in living as a relational, ecological self, whose goal is the flourishing of the whole earth community.<sup>25</sup>

Plumwood's alternative to the Self/Other dualism of an ecological self that recognizes each "earth other" as its own center of agency could prove helpful.

Recognizing that each being has its own center of agency in turn places appropriate limits on that agency when we live in community. The relational, ecological self does not need

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<sup>23</sup> Philosopher Mary Midgley argues that we are asking the wrong questions when we search for what makes humans different from animals. We should rather ask "what distinguishes humans among the animals, unless we think we're machines or angels." The question is also wrong because "it asks for a single, simple, final distinction, and for one that confers praise." Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 (1978)), 203, 06.

<sup>24</sup> Adams and Gruen, "Ecofeminist Footings," 41.

<sup>25</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 154-55.

to have the exact same interests as every earth other. Instead, grounded in “care, love, friendship, and community,” relational selves can “include among our essential interests and desires some of the *general* goals of the other’s good or flourishing” without “assuming all or even any of their specific interests or goals, either in addition to or instead of our own.” A relational self can have empathy for different needs, while maintaining one’s own needs.<sup>26</sup> Plumwood’s relational philosophy offers a framework that avoids both the narrow individualism of many animal rights philosophies and the holist eco-justice perspective that acknowledges only the needs of the whole (while still privileging human needs over all others). Relational ecological selves in a community of mutual care can both have needs of their own, *and* seek to honor the needs of others, to the benefit of all. Zimbabwean ecofeminist theologian Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale puts tis mutual care in terms of *pastoral care*, writing, “Pastoral care is not solely the curing of human souls, but it includes the curing of non-humans through reconciling non-humans with humans.”<sup>27</sup> Mutual care across species of humans and animals can be healing for all creatures.

To live in reciprocity and mutuality with the rest of the earth requires an understanding of the self that is not completely conflated with other beings, even while individuals are interconnected, not autonomous, individual selves. The notion of reciprocity, while absent or minimized in many Western traditions, is central to many indigenous cultures. Potawatomi botanist and environmentalist Robin Wall Kimmerer

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "Women's Reproductive and Natural Environmental Health: An African Ecofeminist Pastoral Care Praxis from Ndebele, Zimbabwe," in *Mother Earth, Mother African and Theology*, ed. Sinenhlanhla Chisale and Rozelle Robson Bosch (Capetown: AOSIS, 2021), 124.

describes the practice of the “Honorable Harvest” in her work *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*:

The Honorable Harvest asks us to give back, in reciprocity, for what we have been given. Reciprocity helps resolve the moral tension of taking a life by giving in return something of value that sustains the ones who sustain us. One of our responsibilities as human people is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world.<sup>28</sup>

Ecofeminism is indebted to the richness of indigenous wisdom in its articulation of reciprocity as ecofeminist practice.<sup>29</sup> Plumwood, for example, draws on Australian aboriginal wisdom and practice throughout her writings.<sup>30</sup> Haraway, like Plumwood and Kimmerer, also speaks about reciprocity:

Once again we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories. Appreciation of the complexity is, of course, invited. But more is required too. Figuring out what the more might be is the work of situated companion species.<sup>31</sup>

Not only humans are responsible and response-able, as Haraway frames it. Rather, “responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and

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<sup>28</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ecofeminism’s usage of indigenous epistemologies is not wholly welcomed, and is sometimes seen as unacknowledged appropriation. Feminist scholar Lucía López-Serrano argues that borrowing from indigenous wisdom has political implications; to use indigenous epistemologies without supporting, for example, sovereignty for native peoples, is a form of settler colonialism. Lucía López-Serrano, “Indigenous Ecofeminism? Decolonial Practices and Indigenous Resurgence in Lee Maracle’s Works,” *Canada & Beyond* 12 (2023): 85-86, <https://doi.org/10.14201/candb.v12i85-101>.

<sup>30</sup> See one of many examples of her engagement with indigenous perspectives in Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, ed. William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 42.

objects, come into being.” Being response-able and responsible comes not through symmetrical relationships built on the similarity of beings to each other, Haraway says. Further, responsiveness requires more than the bare minimum of preventing outright cruelty. Something more is required – “recognition, caring, and shared pain.”<sup>32</sup> Reciprocal relationships only thrive when burdens are shared, and the struggles of the other *matter* to each entangled being.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Chisale draws on the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which she describes as “the interdependence of all creation.” *Ubuntu*, she says, understood correctly, “rejects ... anthropocentric perceptions,” even though anthropocentrism threatens to emerge whenever humans and nonhumans are in relationship.<sup>34</sup> A pastoral care praxis of relationship “breaks the hierarchies” and promotes healing and interconnection.

With a focus on individual attention for others, including nonhuman nature, care ethics offer a pathway for an eco-justice theoethic that values individuals and creatures deserving of moral attention. Care ethics tend to the individual, though, in a different way than traditional animal rights arguments. Clare Palmer contends that typical animal rights

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<sup>32</sup> Haraway reflects on the ways some people try to make human-animal relationships symmetrical by treating animals like humans. Haraway is personally invested in dogs, her companion species of choice, and she reflects on the number of ways the pet industry has expanded to offer services for pets that mirror services for humans, such as high-end pet hotels that rival first class human lodgings. The trend toward treating pets “just like humans” troubles her, representing a collapsing of difference that harms humans and their nonhuman companions. *Ibid.*, 52, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Haraway wrestles with the concept of shared pain extensively in her chapter “Sharing Suffering: Instrumental Relations between Laboratory Animals and Their People.” For Haraway, burden sharing in the context of laboratory testing on animals looks like seeking to center the question “Does this benefit the animals?” and never releasing ourselves from the obligation to ask uncomfortable questions about using animals for human benefit. “I don’t think we will ever have a general principle for what sharing suffering means,” she says, “but it has to be material, practical, and consequential, the sort of engagement that keeps the inequality from becoming commonsensical or taken as obviously okay.” *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Chisale, “Women's Reproductive and Natural Environmental Health,” 124.

arguments, rather than championing the individual animal, as the perspective *seems* to do, *in actuality* “[create] one category in which all individuals are alike, “[subsuming] differences between individuals,” ignoring the unique contexts of each animal.<sup>35</sup> Palmer argues for a care ethics approach rather than a “rights” approach to animal ethics because of the needed emphasis in care ethics on relationships, particularly between humans and nonhuman animals.<sup>36</sup> Rights theories tend to focus on capabilities of the rights-holder. To be “eligible” for certain rights, the rights-holder must meet certain standards. Palmer argues that rights theories are inadequate because rights-holders must all hold the *same* characteristics, meaning that rights are granted to a group *because of* a shared identity, an alikeness that qualifies a group for rights.<sup>37</sup>

In earlier chapters, I pointed to the persistent use of rights language in the Social Principles, and shared Darryl Stephen’s assessment that rights language has been *more* prominent than theological language in UMC polity, although the revision of the Social Principles has resulted in some shifts. I also highlighted Martha Nussbaum’s engagement with rights language in her capabilities care ethic, where she reframes the focus to consider what enables the flourishing of humans and animals. Palmer, Stephens, and Nussbaum all touch on the inadequacies of “rights” frameworks that do not seem able to encompass the concerns of all creatures. Where an eco-justice ethic fails to adequately include individual animals in its scope of concern, animal rights frameworks can overemphasize similarities between all creatures in order to portray animals as worthy of

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<sup>35</sup> Palmer, "Animals in Christian Ethics," 169.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

consideration. A relational care ethic helps make clear how a more fulsome eco-justice perspective values the individual while cherishing difference and kinship at the same time, holding them together.

Haraway, too, pushes back on the usefulness of rights language for thinking about human-animal relationships, turning instead to consider humans and animals in relation to labor. Haraway makes a particularly compelling thinking partner because of the serious way she considers animal labor. While many animal theorists reject most forms of animal labor as exploitative, a persistent theme in Haraway's work considers the joy and fulfillment many animals get from laboring (in certain situations that are not cruel and harmful.) In fact, Haraway finds labor to be a more helpful category than "rights" to think about human-animal connections and the well-being of animals. When we think about rights is exactly when we get too focused on similarity, she suggests, trying to figure out how humans and other-than-humans are or aren't alike and how that does or doesn't qualify them for rights.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Haraway helps us to think about ways humans and animals can be useful to each other, envisioning animals and humans as "rendering each other capable" when they work together in ways that are collaborative instead of driven by human exploitation of animals.<sup>39</sup>

Haraway's willingness to "stay with the trouble" of animal labor, sitting with the uncomfortable tensions of the way humans make use of the work of nonhuman animals, makes her an excellent resource for shaping an ecojustice theology in a denominational context like The UMC with deep agricultural roots that are reliant on extensive animal

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<sup>38</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 18.

labor. Further, the UMC and other mainline Protestant churches have been speaking on issues of labor justice for centuries. John Wesley, for example, spoke about the dangerous workplace conditions of impoverished laborers during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>40</sup> The 1908 Social Creed of The Methodist Episcopal Church (a predecessor body to The UMC), which mirrored language in other mainline denominations in the Social Gospel movement era, centered on labor rights, including such topics as protection for workers, advocating for conciliation and arbitration in labor disputes, establishing a living wage, elimination of child labor, and the “sweating system,” and advocacy for a reduced work week.<sup>41</sup> The UMC’s newly revised Social Principles likewise continue to call for worker justice, and the eco-justice and environmental justice movements have included attention to climate change and how pollution, toxics, and other factors negatively affect human workers. Thus, a strong foundation already exists for committing denominational attention to animal workers, and considering how humans are failing to render capable their nonhuman kin upon whose labor we rely. Haraway takes seriously the role of animal workers in a way that might provide a meaningful way to ask questions about how the practices of farming and industrial animal agriculture care (or fail to care) for animal partners.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Does The United Methodist Church Support Workers' Rights?," The United Methodist Church,, 2020, accessed 1 March 2026, 2026, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-does-the-united-methodist-church-support-worker-rights>.

<sup>41</sup> "The 1908 Social Creed of the Methodist Episcopal Church," General Board of Church and Society, accessed 1 March, 2026, <https://www.umcjustice.org/articles/the-1908-social-creed-of-the-methodist-episcopal-church-822>.

<sup>42</sup> I do find Haraway sometimes willing to tolerate laboring conditions for animals that push the boundaries both of animals’ consent and desire to labor, and the limits of what I consider “humane” conditions for working animals. Haraway argues, for example, that “lab animals” are not “unfree’ in some abstract and transcendental sense,” but instead that animals have “degrees of freedom” that include their noncooperation in experiments conducted on them or their “refusal to live.” She admits this kind of freedom is a “low standard” indeed. Despite the imbalance of pain and sufferings humans cause to animals

Haraway's attention to concrete examinations of animal laborers demonstrates another principle of feminist care ethics. As part of its commitment to appreciate difference as part of meaningful relationality, feminist care ethics reject universalizing, refusing the quest for an "objective" perspective. Care ethics' emphasis on relationality pairs with its emphasis on situatedness and epistemologies. Impartial vision is not possible. Peterson writes, "Our knowledge, in short, is always limited ... we can no longer claim, or even aim for, complete, objective truth, about nature or anything else."<sup>43</sup> Instead, grounded in our particular contexts, we can seek understanding through relationship with others. Haraway calls our contexts "situated knowledge," which entails renouncing what she calls "the god trick" – the false premise that one can observe from afar, untethered to detail and specificity. "Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge," Haraway writes.<sup>44</sup>

The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.<sup>45</sup>

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used in scientific experimentation, she does not find reason to end most experimentation on animals. She does, however, commit to continuing to wrestle with the discomfort such kind of animal labor and sacrifice cause her. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 72-75.

<sup>43</sup> Anna L. Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>44</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

Attention to situatedness is a strength of care ethics, calling for intentional, focused care. A care ethic cannot be a “delusional caring in general” for Haraway. Care is specific and situated: “*this* caring,” she writes.<sup>46</sup> Ethical claims can be made only within a situated context, shaped by relationship to the people and places and other beings with whom we live in community. Ecofeminist ethics are not abstract, not about theoretical imaginary scenarios; ecofeminist praxis addresses actual situations in all their specificity, centering *subjects* rather than *objects*.

The attention to specificity in an ecofeminist approach lends itself to never losing sight of the individual for the sake of the whole when considering the moral worth of the more-than-human world. Care ethics nimbly adapts its ethical conclusions based on the important specifics of concrete situations, instead of adhering to inflexible tenets that must be applied no matter the circumstance. This adaptability enables ecofeminist care ethics to move between a holism-focused environmental ethic and an individual-animal rights approach. Ecofeminist philosopher Karen S. Emmerman argues that abstracted moral scenarios, separated from the details of an actual situation, present false dichotomies, suggesting simple solutions to complex questions.<sup>47</sup> An ecofeminist approach to concrete moral dilemmas from contextualized situations eliminates all-or-nothing ethical approaches, says Emmerman.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Karen S. Emmerman, "Inter-animal Moral Conflict and Moral Repair: A Contextualized Ecofeminist Approach in Action," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc., 2014), 182.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-86. Describing a time when she, a vegan, felt she had to choose a formula with sheep-sourced Vitamin D for her premature child, Emmerman recounts that her decision did not place humans above sheep unequivocally. Rather, since she had deep and specific obligations to her son to care for him, she prioritized her son's needs in this specific situation. Emmerman's wrestling with her use of sheep-

The ecofeminist insistence on a situated ethic that values context keeps ecofeminism from being simply an academic and philosophical exercise, and instead allows care ethics speak to the lived realities of a messy world of entangled relationships. A care ethic is carried out in everyday situations, attending to time, place, and circumstances. While the ecojustice movement has certainly intended to offer a theoethical *praxis*, I think ecojustice theology often loses sight of situatedness for broadness. The ecojustice movement has tried to link together areas of oppression, showing how injustice for the earth and its creatures relates to injustices that impact human lives. As a theoethic enacted in the very situated worlds of denominational life and church communities trying to live justly, ecojustice may thrive in engaging the kind of attentiveness that ecofeminist praxis emphasizes. In the fall of 2025, The United Methodist Church approved constitutional amendments relating to regionalization, which paves a path for more contextualized organizational practices *and* social justice commitments.<sup>49</sup> While the updated Social Principles will serve the entire denomination, regions of The UMC will be able to adapt parts of church law to their particular contexts, and adopt resolutions that suggest regionally-tailored actions *based* on the Social Principles. In global regions of the denomination where factory farming is the dominant form of food production, regional polity might better address these exploitative practices without assuming that they speak to practices in all cultures.<sup>50</sup> For decades, the

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sourced vitamin D is quite extensive and complex, and she explores her own questions about whether she exhausted her options, and what her choices say about valuing the lives of animals.

<sup>49</sup> Heather Hahn, "New United Methodist Church Structure Ratified," (2025). <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/new-united-methodist-church-structure-ratified>.

<sup>50</sup> Undoubtedly, regions outside of the U.S. might address animal ethics in ways that meet the needs of their contexts. In my work with the Christian animal advocacy CreatureKind, which I mention in earlier chapters, I connected with animal rights activists from Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Part of their

denomination has struggled with a colonial structure that presumes a universal social justice ethic works for every region and situation. Regionalization seeks to honor a contextualized way of being church. Though the decision to regionalize was likely not made with ecofeminist care ethics in the minds of most delegates, the decision for restructuring shows the value of a situated approach to social justice in practice.<sup>51</sup>

As I have been demonstrating, ecofeminist care ethics lend themselves well to connection with ecotheology. A care ethic resonates well through its emphasis on relationship with the theological prioritization of the neighbor, the stranger, the Other.<sup>52</sup> Ecofeminist philosopher Ivone Gebara's ecotheology places the source of relationship in God's very being. "I do not affirm the individuality of God," she writes, "... but rather God's relatedness."<sup>53</sup> God is relationship, and thus insistence on the individuality of God is a human construct, wrapped up in the myth of human individuality and separateness from others.<sup>54</sup> A Christian theology of relationship comes from the scriptural commands to love, show hospitality, and welcome to the stranger, to show the same love for other as for the self. Only in relationship with the other – both those who are known to us and

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advocacy focused on reducing fears related to predator animals, encouraging people to view all animals as sacred members of God's creation. See Tikobane Trust, <https://tikobanezimbabwe.org/>, for an example of this work.

<sup>51</sup> Though regionalization in The UMC offers opportunities to dismantle colonial hierarchies that give the United States an elevated denominational status, the new structure could also create an isolated United States UMC that feels "free" of the influence of United Methodists in Africa, the Philippines, and other regions where The UMC is prominent. I believe, however, that a shared denominational polity and Social Principles will serve as a countermeasure to such tendencies.

<sup>52</sup> For examples from the Christian tradition, see Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 12:32, Hebrews 13:2, Leviticus 19:33-34. These themes of loving the other and of offering hospitality are pervasive in the Bible.

<sup>53</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 107.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, 07.

those outside our immediate sphere, can humans fulfill the primary commandments from a relational God. Ecofeminist thought and theology pushes the boundaries of who is counted as the neighbor or stranger to whom we owe responsibility, calling us to consider the kinds of relationships we might have with the more-than-human world. Haraway describes the kind of relationship she envisions for humans and earth others as being in love: “To be in love means to be worldly, to be in connection with significant others and signifying others, on many scales, in layers of locals and globals, in ramifying webs ... Once one has been in touch, obligations and possibilities for response change.”<sup>55</sup> Is not Haraway calling for loving thy (other-than-human) neighbor? Catholic ecofeminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson is explicit: the relationality we have to other creatures is based on our relationality with God. “Held in being, continuously created, the world exists from the beginning in a relation of radical reliance on the free gift of a loving God,” she writes in *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*.<sup>56</sup> The relationship with God becomes a model for human relationship with others – humans and other creatures alike. Clare Palmer also connects care ethics to ecotheological perspectives, arguing that too often, animals in ecotheology are simply understood as “part of ‘earth’ or ‘the earth community,’” a pattern I pointed out as recurring in eco-justice thought. Yet, nonhuman animals cannot be “subsumed” into these broader categories without considering the explicit and implicit theological and ethical implications.<sup>57</sup> Ecofeminist theology respects each aspect of creation in its own right.

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<sup>55</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 218.

<sup>57</sup> Palmer, "Animals in Christian Ethics," 163-64.

### Engaged Activist Praxis

The commitment to an engaged, activist praxis that seeks to live the scholarly claims of ecofeminism is a claim repeated by many ecofeminist theorists. In the opening line of the first chapter of their edited volume on ecofeminism and “feminist interactions with other animals,” Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen center the praxis-oriented nature of ecofeminism: “Ecofeminism is a robust philosophical practice with engaged, activist roots.”<sup>58</sup> Like Adams, Greta Gaard stresses the importance of activist praxis to feminist methodology. Feminist methodology is about improving the “real material conditions for marginalized individuals and communities,” which means that feminist research prioritizes careful listening to those whom they are researching.<sup>59</sup> Peterson highlights the “structural similarities” between feminism and religion in their approach to ethics, the emphasis on relationality, and engagement with narrative to convey ideas about what it means to be human in the context of a larger world.<sup>60</sup> Peterson’s statements serve to underscore ecofeminism’s reputation for engaged activist theory. Ecofeminism is a theoretical lens committed to praxis, as the eco-justice movement has been in many ways. I have argued that the eco-justice theoethic of non-anthropocentrism is weak in *practice*. Encouraged by ecofeminist commitments, the eco-justice movement can repair broken connections between theory and action, self-reflecting on the disconnects between

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<sup>58</sup> Adams and Gruen, "Ecofeminist Footings," 1.

<sup>59</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, 98.

<sup>60</sup> Peterson, *Being Human*, 129.

theoethical claims and actual advocacy for nonhuman animals and dismantling harmful anthropocentrism.

The commitment to engaged activism carries into ecofeminist animal studies as well. While critical animal studies theorists have focused on academic analysis of human-animal relationships, Gaard says, feminist animal studies theorists have always focused on scholar-activist *praxis*, functioning as a justice movement. “When feminists attend to the question of the animal,” she writes, “we do so from a standpoint that centers other animal species, makes connections among diverse forms of oppression, and seeks to put an end to animal suffering.”<sup>61</sup> Ecofeminist animal studies try to center nonhuman animals – their suffering, their experiences, their lives, their needs.

A frequent part of ecofeminist animal rights praxis is adopting a vegan diet, though certainly not all animals-focused ecofeminists choose vegan practice. Syl Ko writes about the importance of veganism, describing what she calls “black veganism,” a practice she and sister and co-author Aph Ko center in their work, and a practice that is also central to Christopher Carter’s decolonial ethic.<sup>62</sup> Black veganism situates the work of animal liberation into the context of Black liberation. Unlike mainstream veganism, Ko, says, black veganism never has to struggle to connect the mistreatment of animals with human oppression, rather “the ideology in which the animal situation is articulated is

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<sup>61</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, 34-35.

<sup>62</sup> Carter writes that “*black veganism should be viewed as compassionate action that helps us relink to the antioppressive and liberative religion of Jesus.*” Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food*, 13-14. He characterizes Jesus’s compassionate way of being as resisting a dualistic approach that says one must either fight injustice with violence or fail to confront injustice at all. Instead, Jesus embraces a nonviolent pursuit of justice.

imbedded in black liberation ideology.”<sup>63</sup> Black veganism directly counters mainstream veganism’s portrayal of “the animal issue” as an isolated justice concern.<sup>64</sup> Feminist critical race theorist A. Breeze Harper does not use “black veganism” language, but she too writes about the colonizing connections between the racist structures of society and the oppression of nonhuman animals. Emphasizing health and well-being for Black Americans, Harper frames veganism as an intentional antiracist, antipoverty praxis that “[promotes] a break from addictive, ecocidal, uncompassionate consumption.” Harper continues to link vegan praxis to reclaiming Black and indigenous heritages: “There are thriving communities of color throughout America that are rooted in holistic healing and have adapted their ethnic identity to more plant-based diets from their people’s indigenous philosophy before colonization, while simultaneously practicing eco-sustainability, decolonization, and respect for nonhuman animals.”<sup>65</sup> Ko and Harper both understand their approaches to veganism as practices that help center intersectionality and a complex web of oppressions. Mainstream veganism in the U.S., on the other hand, focuses on the “animal problem” as a single issue, Ko argues, not focusing on coloniality at all. Black veganism, on the other hand, is not a movement or a statement, but an imaginative “*methodological tool*” to counter coloniality’s aim of making “certain that

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<sup>63</sup> Ko, "Black Veganism Revisited," 121.

<sup>64</sup> Aph and Syl Ko note that black veganism is a way of practicing veganism that does not even need to directly address the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman animals directly, depending on an activist’s “lived situation.” Activists can still work to dismantle the entangled system that results in the negative treatment of animals. Syl Ko and Aph Ko, "Why Black Veganism Is More Than Just Being Black and Vegan," in *Aphro-Ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, ed. Syl Ko and Aph Ko (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Publishing, 2020), 52-53.

<sup>65</sup> A. Breeze Harper, "Social Justice Beliefs and Addiction to Uncompassionate Consumption," in *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, ed. A. Breeze Harper (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Publishing & Media, 2020), 30.

futures remain unimagined, that certain ideas remain unthinkable so that it seems that whatever we have now is all we have to work with.”<sup>66</sup> While Haraway challenges us to better consider which ideas and which scholars we “think with,” Ko challenges us to consider which ideas coloniality tries to *prevent* us from thinking with. Veganism can be a praxis that opens doors to antiracist and anticolonial ways of thinking and acting, and abstaining from eating animals can be a step towards openness to transspecies listening, a practice I discuss below. A significant part of gatherings in Christian community centers on sharing food, both in the act of holy communion and in the informal communion that takes place at meal times. Vegan practice – especially when grounded in antiracist and anticolonial ways of being – could be part of an eco-justice theoethic that helps us listen to our earth others.

Another aspect of ecofeminist praxis is honoring epistemologies– intentionally making space for the many ways of knowing offered not only by people, but by earth others as well. Feminist methodology asks “what counts as knowledge” and “who can be a ‘knower’ or ‘agent of knowledge,’” Gaard explains.<sup>67</sup> Epistemologies are a central part of Gebara’s work, exploring both the need for deconstructing harmful epistemologies and ways to construct or recover ways of knowing that are liberative for humans and the earth. Androcentric and anthropocentric epistemologies pretend to offer the only way of knowing reality, but their perspectives are really limited to male and human experiences, while masquerading as the representing the experience of all.<sup>68</sup> Ecofeminist

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<sup>66</sup> Ko, "Black Veganism Revisited," 124-26.

<sup>67</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 22.

epistemology, on the other hand, does not seek to be “right,” but instead to listen to the wisdom of “the community of all living beings.”<sup>69</sup> An ecofeminist epistemology requires “humility and generosity,” says ecofeminist and Gebara scholar Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, committing to “a dynamic state of openness.”<sup>70</sup> Ecofeminist epistemology is based on lived experience, includes bodily knowing, recognizes cultural contexts, and assumes interdependence among all creatures. Acknowledging interdependence means that one can respect and care for the earth without denying any one’s individual subjectivity.<sup>71</sup>

McFague grounds epistemological work in Christian theology. She reflects on seasons in her life when she viewed herself as the only subject as she related to nature – “I was the whole, the only one,” she felt. Eventually, through learning about the animals she encountered in nature, learning the names of the plants she saw, she realized that she was in subject-subject relationships with others:

The language of relationship – respect, reciprocity, interest in the particular, listening, openness, paying attention, care, concern – all this sort of language becomes relevant to how we know others. The way we come to know another ... becomes a model for ecological knowledge: it is a practical knowledge with the goal of responding to the other in terms of their own well-being. We want to know them better so we can ... care for them more appropriately.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>70</sup> Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, "A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology," *Journal of the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013), [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1011-76012013000100007](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1011-76012013000100007).

<sup>71</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 48-52. Haraway aligns with Gebara: To reflect on the difference between humans and other-than-human beings requires a nonanthropocentric approach that is shaped by not only what we know, but the ways in which we know. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 122.

<sup>72</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 37-38.

McFague envisions this intentional relationship building, traversing, and deconstructing hierarchical dualisms of the Master model. The onus is on those who have typically been granted disproportionate power that oppresses others, not to reverse binaries, but to unravel them, to better care for earth others in subject-subject relationships. Doing this work is how a Christian should practice the love of neighbor – and nature – cultivating the “loving eye.”<sup>73</sup> The eco-justice movement has listened to wisdom from a number of communities in its quest to carry out its principles, most often working collaboratively with other groups on shared goals, as I have pointed out. How can the eco-justice movement be more intentional about incorporating the wisdom of the more-than-human earth community?

Part of knowing differently, building relationships, and valuing the knowledges of earth others comes through listening. Ecofeminist care ethics in practice stress the importance of listening to the more-than-human world. The work of listening is critical for building a just animal ethic. Native American ecofeminist Linda Hogan embodies transspecies listening in her scholarship, evident in works such as *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (2020), a collection of poetry and prose. “The animal lives here have no numbers, no names,” she writes, describing a period of watching and listening to animals in a wilderness area near her home. “They are simply a people, nations of their own kind with lives as sacred as any of ours. I learn their ways, all different, all unlike human ways, yet all together we are one life, one breath, all part of this same shared earth. Daily, too, I hope not a single one is missing.”<sup>74</sup> Hogan’s beautiful prose speaks of a deep

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>74</sup> Linda Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 6-7.

connectedness between humans and animals that comes from intentional, ongoing listening, watching, and observing. Hogan is committed to listening to earth others.

While Hogan shows us transspecies listening in practice, literally sitting and listening to animals, other ecofeminist perspectives outline a theory of listening to animals. Ecofeminist care theorist Josephine Donovan stresses that a feminist animal care theory centers on a *dialogical* mode of engagement, rather than the dialectical method, a mode that prizes conversation with and listening to nonhuman animals. Care theory seeks to listen to communication from the other, including animal others, and asks how humans can construct an animal ethic “in conversation with the animals.”<sup>75</sup> An eco-justice theoethic grew in part by intentionally listening to nondominant voices, and Hogan and Donovan beckon it listen even further. Building dialogical relationships of care entails seeking to “reach out emotionally as well as intellectually to what is different from oneself rather than reshaping (in the case of animals) that difference to conform to one’s own human-based preconceptions.”<sup>76</sup> An ecofeminist animal care ethic does not need to minimize differences or center human experiences and ways of being.

Responding to critiques from animal studies theorists like Singer and Regan, Donovan shrugs off implications that care ethics lead only to favoring animals who are cute, cuddly, and “lovable.” Instead, Donovan articulates a care ethic that centers on “listening to other life-forms regardless of how alien they may seem to us and incorporating their communications into our moral reaction to them.” Even if some

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<sup>75</sup> Josephine Donovan, "Caring to Dialogue: Feminism and the Treatment of Animals," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2014), 49.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

creatures are not snugly, they experience terror, anxiety, and pain.<sup>77</sup> Care ethics prioritizes listening to what earth others try to communicate. Animals do speak, Donovan writes, and “it is not impossible to understand much of what they are saying” if we learn to “read the languages of the natural world.”<sup>78</sup>

Communicating across species is also a topic Haraway discusses, writing from her usual context of thinking about canine companion species. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway focuses on the idea of “becoming with”: “To be one is always to become with many.” Not only is she in relationship with companion species, like her beloved dog(s), but she points out that humans are also in intimate relationship with the bacteria, fungi, protists, and more that are either necessary to being alive or that are just “hitching a ride.” Either way, to be is *to be with* other beings. *To be with* is to be in what she calls “contact zones,” the many places of meeting, of fleshy “world-making entanglements” that come from encounters between species. We “become with” in situated naturecultures. “We are at stake to each other,” Haraway declares.<sup>79</sup>

Like Donovan, Haraway believes we already communicate with animals more than we are willing to admit. “To claim not to be able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters, however imperfectly,” she writes, “is a denial of mortal entanglements ... for which we are responsible and in which we respond.” In training dogs in agility trials, for example, techniques and methods are part of training, but they

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 61. Anna Peterson similarly urges that an incomplete human understanding of other species of animals should not spell the end of our *attempt* to understand the subjectivity and experiences of other species. Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 159.

<sup>79</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 55.

are not “response.” Response, as Haraway distinguishes it, “is comprehending that subject-making connection is real. Response is face-to-face in the contact zone of an entangled relationship. Response is in the open. Companion species know this.”<sup>80</sup> In the contact zone, all parties are involved. “Once ‘we’ have met, we can never be ‘the same’ again,” Haraway writes. “Propelled by the tasty but risky obligation of curiosity among companion species, once we know, we cannot not know. If we know well ... we care. That is how responsibility grows.”<sup>81</sup> Through the practice of listening and learning from earth others, entanglements are deepened.

In Chapter 2, I shared former GBCS executive Jaydee Hanson’s belief that people increasingly have no connections to animals outside of their pets. I add that the other primary engagement many have with animals is at mealtimes: people “interact” with animals as food. Hanson’s claim is true even of eco-justice activists. Pat Watkins, for example, who founded The UMC’s Earthkeepers movement, and who has been a leader who has spent decades working on eco-justice concerns in a variety of settings, responded that he had “almost nothing to say,” when I asked about any intersections in his work with concern for nonhuman animals.<sup>82</sup> “I have not done anything [related to animals],” he said, and neither had the groups of which he’d been a part. Animals are often completely outside the scope of people’s moral and ethical consideration, even among those working to care for creation.

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<sup>80</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 226-27.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>82</sup> Watkins, interview.

Following up on his comments about the lack of connections to animals, Hanson asked, “How can [people] know what animals experience if they don’t see it?”<sup>83</sup> His question deserves a better response than lamenting that times have changed. As I have mentioned, I think The UMC made an important (if still limited) shift when the revised Social Principles renamed “The Natural World” section to “The Community of All Creation,” although it remains to be seen how a change in language will impact polity and advocacy work related to the section. The shift in language begins to move to an understanding that humans are part of a community with the rest of the created world. If this is so, humans are in the “contact zone,” in entangled relationships that demand our attention, and our acknowledgement that we can and *are* communicating to and hearing communications from the more-than-human world. The UMC has conducted listening sessions for a variety of reasons across the decades, including during the crafting of the original Social Principles and during the process of drafting the Revised Social Principles. Among the insights from the listening sessions conducted before the Revised Social Principles were adopted, for example, was a strong consensus that the Social Principles were too U.S.-centric, overlooking the voices of the global church.<sup>84</sup> Though the listening sessions for the Social Principles included hearing from more than four thousand respondents, however, these voices came from existing members of The UMC, and mostly already highly-engaged members of the denomination. In some ways, the

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<sup>83</sup> Hanson, interview.

<sup>84</sup> Davies, interview. I also discuss these listening sessions in Chapter 2, and return to considering these listening sessions in the Conclusion.

denomination was listening best to those already most engaged in the institutional church, rather than seeking out other connections in The UMC's contact zones.

Certainly, the denomination knows that listening is an important part of social justice praxis, something that precedes speaking and acting. What might it look like if The UMC engaged in intentional and active listening to the creatures with whom humans share in "the community of all creation"? The denomination seeks to hear from a diverse array of constituencies to guide its justice work. How can the denomination listen to the needs of earth others? If most people interact with animals only as pets, or as food products, opportunities for listening through witnessing the lives of animals are limited. Further, much of the industrialized food system is hidden from view; it is exceptionally difficult for a non-employee to gain access to factory farms to witness the conditions in which animals are raised and slaughtered for food. Trans-species listening, then, might start with advocacy around access to farmed animals, so that witnessing their lives is even possible. The lack of transparency around how farmed animals are treated should be considered an urgent justice issue, inspiring denominational action. An ecofeminist strategy of trans-species listening is part of an engaged praxis that invites creative commitment to better understanding.<sup>85</sup>

### Holism Redeemed

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<sup>85</sup> One inspiring and creative trans-species listening project is from *just wondering...*, a collective that produces animated essays on a variety of ecological and anti-speciesist subjects. "we fly, we crawl, we swim," for example, is a film about climate justice that centers multispecies experiences. Aron Nor, "we fly, we crawl, we swim," (Romania, 2021). <https://justwondering.io/we-fly-we-crawl-we-swim/>.

I have explored already what ecofeminism contributes to animal rights advocacy. Ecofeminist philosophy also offers meaningful critique and response to environmental theories, such as deep ecology and ecological holism, pointing both to the shortcomings of holist thought and outlining constructive approaches to redeeming the best of holist philosophy. Many ecofeminists seek to make space within holist environmentalism for valuing the individual, especially the more-than-human individuals. Chapter 4 covered Anna Peterson's hope for a kind of reconciliation between holism and animal rights. Peterson sees within ecofeminist scholarship a potential framework which can serve as an "alternative and challenge" to both ecocentric holism *and* individualistic animal ethics. Though Peterson nods to the varying streams of ecofeminism, including essentialist approaches that support an innate connection between women and nature, her marked preference is for ecofeminist philosophies like Plumwood's, which "reject ... dualisms altogether." Such ecofeminism is "grounded in the 'self-in-relationship,' a model of humanness that recognizes individual integrity as well as interdependence, relationship, and continuity." This approach "rejects ... [the] presumption of conflict between individuals and whole" that plagues both holistic environmental perspectives and animal ethics that value *only* individuals.<sup>86</sup> An expanded eco-justice ethic can learn from an approach like Peterson's.

As I shared in Chapter 4, ecofeminist philosopher Marti Kheel engages in the kind of work Peterson describes. After outlining the problematic nature of a masculinist holism, Kheel argues that an ecofeminist holist ethic embraces interdependence without the "totalizing tendencies" of masculinist holism. While caring for endangered species

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<sup>86</sup> Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, 37-38.

has been an important part of a holist environmentalism, Kheel calls “species” a “mental construct, akin to the notion of race. It is the living beings who matter, not the human abstraction.”<sup>87</sup> Ecofeminist holism affirms that both individuals and wholes are important, and both domestic and wild animals deserve care. Ecofeminists “honor other-than-human animals in the domestic sphere by providing them with homes, while simultaneously advocating a world in which other animals no longer live in captivity.”<sup>88</sup> For Kheel, ecofeminism consistently poses more probing questions than masculinist holism, pushing for attention to ecosystems and the individuals within them.

Conservation of what? Preservation for whom? What are the origins of violent practices toward nature, and what role, if any, does masculine identity play in their expression? How can violent practices be prevented, rather than merely restrained? Where do domesticated animals figure in nature ethics? Why is the notion of species accorded so much importance in nature ethics?<sup>89</sup>

Sustained attention to answering these complex questions results in a “consciousness” that is not “responsible” for nature in the traditional sense, but in a more literal meaning, akin to Haraway’s construction of response, of being *able to respond* with empathy and care.<sup>90</sup>

Kheel outlines an ecofeminist holism that emphasizes “the importance of appropriate feelings of care and acts of attention in promoting ethical conduct and thought,” recommending veganism as one practice of care for nonhuman animals.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 230.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

Kheel rejects the “hunt” metaphors rampant in masculinist holism, like those employed by Leopold.<sup>92</sup> Instead, Kheel employs a provocative upending of the language and work of “gathering: “Ecofeminism may ... be understood as the *act* of gathering, which involves the collection of life-sustaining practices and ideas, and additionally as *a* gathering, a coming together of multiple voices.”<sup>93</sup> Ecofeminist gathering is both theory and practice, the ethical work of a community seeking the best way to live as part of the larger natural world.

Proponents of an ecofeminist care ethic, Kheel says, agree that care ethics should combine the work of justice and the work of care, but have often struggled in describing the relationship between the two.<sup>94</sup> Kheel offers an ecofeminist philosophy, an ecofeminist care ethic, that

begins with the simple observation that other animals are individual beings with feelings, needs, and desires ... When nature ethicists underline the importance of caring for nature, it is helpful to ask, who is the recipient of care? Are individual beings included in their concept of “nature,” or only larger wholes? Similarly, when people call for “saving tigers and lions,” do they mean individual beings, or only species? The philosopher Margaret Urban Walker also suggests that we evaluate moral values by asking “Who’s kept quiet?” and “What’s left out?” in the telling of lives. These are important questions for assessing our interactions with nature.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> For example, Kheel cites Leopold’s journals, in which he writes that “Golf is a delightful accomplishment, but the love of hunting is almost a physiological characteristic.” Leopold suggests that while men might not like golf, a man who does not love to hunt “is hardly normal” and Leopold would not know “how to deal with him.” *Ibid.*, 120. Aldo Leopold, “Goose Music,” in *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold*, ed. Luna B. Leopold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>93</sup> Kheel, *Nature Ethics*, 214-15.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-23.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

Caring for other-than-human creatures “can only flourish with the aid of empathy,” Kheel insists, which consists of “many small acts of attention” that help us see the subjectivity of nonhuman nature.<sup>96</sup> These small acts coalesce into a strong moral framework.

I find Kheel’s gathering metaphor, which references both the drawing together of creative ideas for a just care ethic in practice, *and* the necessity of literally coming together in community to listen and respond to the voices of others, compelling as a metaphor for the work of ecojustice that takes shape in communities of faith. In United Methodist practice, Methodist founder John Wesley spoke of “holy conferencing” as a means of grace, a practice through which people could receive the grace of God. Although holy conferencing is often used simply to describe the local, regional, national, and global meetings of United Methodists, the practice is richer and more demanding than simply conducting the business of the denomination. Holy conferencing demands a commitment to fostering an abiding respect for all the parties who gather together, an openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and a willingness to strive for more than a “majority rules” culture. Holy conferencing asks for vulnerability even while tackling extremely divisive topics.<sup>97</sup> Wesley scholar and former general agency staffer Steve Manskar describes holy conferencing in terms of mutual responsibility: “We are responsible for each other. We are responsible to make sure that we're going to give you everything you need to keep the promises you made when you were baptized or confirmed. That's the goal of Christian conference,” he shares.<sup>98</sup> Of course, as my case

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Emily Snell, "Means of Grace: Christian Conferencing."  
<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/means-of-grace-christian-conferencing>.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

study revealed in stark terms, “holy conferencing” is not always achieved at denominational gatherings. The similarities, though, between the values of conferencing and the ideals of ecofeminist praxis are striking. In the body of Christ, members are meant to be responsible to and for one another, something that is demonstrated by listening to the other, respecting the other, and working slowly and carefully to act in ways that support each other’s needs. The “ingredients” of an ecofeminist ethic that makes space for listening to, caring for, and responding responsibly to earth others are present in the way The UMC commits to gathering.

### Conclusions

Can denominations working within the ecojustice framework push their boundaries to include nonhuman animals in their scope of relational care as well? Nonhuman animals, situated subjects in their own right, are constituents that are overlooked in The UMC’s theological reflection, relationship-building, and eco-justice advocacy. In this chapter, I have shown the ways in which ecofeminists can be partners to think with, imagining the possibilities that emerge from decentering the human to better build relationships with our earth others.

The ecofeminist attention to dismantling dualisms is, and has been, a valuable resource for eco-justice theoethics and the larger context of Christian theology.<sup>99</sup> Influenced by Platonic thought and Enlightenment reasoning in its interpretation of biblical texts, contemporary Christianity is deeply entrenched in dualistic thinking. These

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<sup>99</sup> While some animal rights scholars writing from other perspectives also attend to human/animal difference in their work, I find the strong ecofeminist framings of human/animal difference especially helpful in relation to the theoethical concerns that are central to this work.

theological dualisms also appear in a misogynistic suppressing of women's leadership over the centuries and the racialized subjugation of some groups as inferior to God's chosen people. Problematic dualisms have also supported a domination theology of the earth, and sharp separation between the theological and moral value of humans over any other part of creation. Although the eco-justice movement rejects dualistic worldviews in principle, eco-justice theology would be enhanced by the primary focus ecofeminism gives to deconstructing the logics of domination that are tied up in dualistic constructions.

On the brink of a reorganized denomination including changes in regional power structures, The UMC has the opportunity to carefully deconstruct the colonial structures that have long privileged certain voices over others in the connection. Ecofeminist work draws attention to the multiple layers of "othering" that have pervaded institutional structures, including othering nonhuman members of the earth community. Engaging in ecofeminist practices like building relationships that value difference, honoring unique ways of knowing, and committing to transspecies listening can help push the eco-justice movement and the denomination contexts in which eco-justice functions to expand their scope of care to better include each being in creation. Ecofeminist care ethics draw eco-justice theoethics to a richer embodiment of its values, strengthened by a love of others that better includes nonhuman animals.

## CONCLUSIONS: LOVE ONE ANOTHER

“Failure to respect the subjective experience of other animals would allow for the maintenance of the subjective experience hierarchy that currently upholds white supremacy. There is no anti-oppressive way to deny the subjective life experience of another animal, human or otherwise.” – “Race, Animals, and a New Vision of the Beloved Community,” Christopher Carter<sup>1</sup>

At the start of this work, I shared my position as a stakeholder in my own research: I have been committed to veganism for many years, and consider myself an activist, advocating for the status and moral consideration of nonhuman animals, practices I consider an expression of my personal theoethics. In the nascent days of articulating my guiding research questions and my thesis about the eco-justice movement, a persistent curiosity lay beneath my work: Why aren't more progressive Christians supporting the rights of animals alongside their other justice efforts? Why are there so few vegans and animal activists among the progressive mainline Protestant circles in which I move? Although my eventual research narrowed to consider the eco-justice framework and its relationship to the more-than-human world, I find my initial curiosity largely satisfied. I attribute the disconnect to the complex history of environmentalism in mainline Protestantism, including a deep-seated anthropocentrism within Christianity, the well-founded critiques of the activist strategies of the animal rights movement, a lack of consistent attention to intersectionality in the animal rights movement, and a core conflict between many strains of environmentalism and the animal rights movement in understanding the subjectivity and place of animals in the wider ecosystem. These are

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, "Race, Animals, and a New Vision," 79.

also factors in the relationship between the eco-justice movement and the animal rights movement, which is not straightforward. These two movements have been shaped by other movements and philosophical frameworks like the environmental justice movement, the antivivisection movement, holist philosophies, ecofeminist philosophies, by the larger context of social changes, by racial prejudice and gender bias influencing who becomes a movement leader and which perspectives are prioritized, and by the changing role of institutions and denominations. This tangle of influences on the eco-justice and animal rights movements has led them down what sometimes seems to be very separate paths.

In answering my queries, one central point is that the eco-justice movement, a prominent environmental lens in the later twentieth century, reconfigured and rearticulated itself to respond to criticism about its commitments to issues like environmental racism. The focus on attending to the intersection of race and ecological devastation was (and is) necessary, vital work. As I outlined through Chapters 1 and 2, eco-justice leadership integrated principles from the forming environmental justice movement like prioritizing environmental hazards that visited the most direct harm on humans, even as it in turn contributed to supporting and shaping environmental justice work. Later, the eco-justice movement adjusted yet again, employing new language like climate justice or creation care/creation justice both in response to scientific developments and a changing socio-political culture and to better meld with the work of other secular and religious environmental groups. As I have shown, the eco-justice movement articulates nonanthropocentric values. Yet, in practice, shaped by eco-justice's other ideological commitments, and by the persistence of anthropocentrism, eco-justice

has been primarily human-centered in its advocacy work. In the case of The United Methodist Church, the answer is even more complex.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2's case study through conducting oral history interviews and engaging in extensive archival research that followed the development and expression of eco-justice work in The United Methodist Church has rarely focused on nonhuman animals, and then only animals as species, who are seemingly not valued for the individual lives that make up the whole. I addressed a number of additional competing factors that have shaped The UMC's embodiment of eco-justice principles, such as The UMC's decades-long struggle over an institutionalized exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from full participation in the denomination, and the denomination's need to respond to persistent pressure from internal and external conservative groups, like The Institute for Religion and Democracy, who sought to undermine the environmental movement and other justice-causes, actively working for the dismantling of UMC agencies like GBCS. The history of eco-justice in The UMC is filled with the complexity of trying to articulate and acts on an ethic of justice for all of creation. What is lost in the eco-justice movement's lack of attention to each animal life? An anthropocentric eco-justice movement undermines the very intersectional work eco-justice sets out to accomplish, offering a diminished pursuit of justice that is not wide enough in its scope.

Fortunately, the movement's ability to change and reform can be seen in its adaptations to respond to other movements through the decades. Since eco-justice theoethics have been committed to the necessity of linking oppressions, convincingly arguing that justice in one realm cannot be unlinked from justice in other realm, and since eco-justice theoethics have a proven history of meeting the changing needs of a

community of leaders and activists, I can envision an eco-justice theoethic that adapts yet again, and I began to lay out a framework for a transformed eco-justice theoethic by drawing on the work of ecofeminists like Val Plumwood, Syl Ko, Donna Haraway, Anna Peterson, and Marti Kheel in Chapter 5. The eco-justice framework can reconsider the place of the animal in its framework, throw off anthropocentric limitations that lump animals into a single entity, and consider animals' importance and value in their own right.

Institutional contexts, however, often limit the expression of ideas, or subtly shape them into what is acceptable. In Chapter 3, using the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and drawing the insights of thinkers like ethicist Willis Jenkins and religion scholar Jane Ellen Nickell, I explored aspects of denominational change and the social movements that unfold within or alongside mainline denominations. Following a church schism in The UMC, the status quo may be upended enough to truly alter the denomination's *habitus*, creating space for change. Denominational institutions can and do change, and they can both respond positively to and take part in leading social justice movements. Although hierarchies and bureaucratic structures sometimes appear impossible to move, persistent action for justice *can* be effective. The eco-justice movement, already committed to the necessity of an expansive quest for justice, includes in its values a theoethical framework that could adapt and widen to more fully value the important place of individual animal lives.

Laurel Kearns writes that “to include other-than-humankind in issues of justice, one must first prove their religious or sacred worth.” Proving the sacred worth of other-than-humankind is work that must be done “against those who argue that their religious

traditions legitimate a more utilitarian (in religious language, dominion) perspective that animals and natural resources have value because of their use to humans.”<sup>2</sup> I am struck by the importance of her opening sentence. Whether or not the world beyond the human should be included in justice is a question of sacred worth. Conversely, then, that which has sacred worth must be included in the work of justice. If the world beyond the human has more value than as just a backdrop for humans, then the justice owed to the “rest of the world” must be more specific than lumping together the rest of the world into a whole, a single biotic community, which can imply that is not worth attending to each subject that makes up the community.

While my exploration of the eco-justice movement has shown its adaptability to better focus on intersectional justice over the decades, the animal rights movement, though certainly changing over time, seems to have lagged in expanding its own scope of justice. Although I have raised important challenges, as detailed in Chapter 4, to the too-often narrow focus of animal rights advocacy from ecofeminist, decolonial, and antiracist perspectives, mainstream animal activism remains insular, missing not only strategic opportunities for connection with other movements, such as eco-justice, but also missing a moral imperative to attend to its own understanding of who is of sacred worth.

Sociologist and animal rights scholar Corey Lee Wrenn, working with philosopher Rob Johnson, call out the single-focus lens of some streams of animal rights activism:

We argue that the utilization of issue-specific advocacy diverts attention from the root cause of injustice, thus compromising the integrity of the claims made. We also argue that this type of advocacy diminishes the importance of other injustices excluded from those issue-specific campaigns and may overload the potential constituency to the point of discouraging motivation. As such, we suggest a more

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<sup>2</sup> Kearns, "Ecology and the Environment," 594.

holistic, comprehensive, and simplified discussion of rights and justice that will not undermine claims-making and will have maximum impact on mobilization ... We suggest that no campaigning can be effective in challenging speciesism if it singles out one issue or species.<sup>3</sup>

Linking animal rights to the eco-justice movement is not just necessary, then, for a more robust eco-justice theoethic. The holistic justice approach of the eco-justice ethic can also contribute to an animal rights framework that rejects a single issue approach, instead embracing the complex intersections that create injustice. The animal rights movement needs to reconnect with the ecofeminist theorists who, as I outlined in Chapter 5, have long been seeking to link the oppression of animals to a larger philosophical conversation about who has value, and how we use animals and the rest of the world beyond the human to prop up larger systems of domination.

Even as I have expounded the many reasons why eco-justice and animal rights have failed to meaningfully intersect as social movements, my research, shaped by an eco-feminist lens, also gives me hope for the future. As I showed in conversation with ecofeminist scholars like Haraway, Peterson, Carter, Wrenn, Harper, and Aph and Syl Ko, there *are* voices that are pushing the animal rights movement outside of its often too narrow scope, calling for the movement to better attend to the connections between justice issues, insisting that animal rights must work for justice for *all* who are oppressed.

I am also hopeful about a new season that I think is unfolding within The United Methodist Church, one that signals potential for reconsidering the moral value of all creatures. When I interviewed Mark Davies, chair of the writing team for the new

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<sup>3</sup> Corey Lee Wrenn and Rob Johnson, "A Critique of Single-Issue Campaigning and the Importance of Comprehensive Abolitionist Vegan Advocacy," *Food, Culture, & Society* 16, no. 4 (2013): 652.

“Community of All Creation” section of the Revised Social Principles, Davies suggested that the vastly different global food production and agricultural practices that exist across The UMC influenced what kind of statements the writing team felt they could suggest when writing about animals. “We definitely need to hear from our siblings around the world,” Davies said, about the significant food justice issues communities are facing. The “Caring for All Creatures” paragraphs in the revised Social Principles reflect that many people in the world *do* eat animals, Davies continued, and thus the writing team searched for areas of potential consensus: how could the revised Social Principles speak about the lives and living conditions of animals in a way that a global denomination could support and that reflects the drastically different ways animal agriculture is practiced around the world?<sup>4</sup> Although the revised Principles do not offer the clear message about the moral place of each animal life that I think is a vital part of embodying a *just* eco-justice theoethic, I am heartened by the deliberative process that Davies describes. In a denomination that does not frequently give attention to the lives of animals, the revisioning process created a space for sustained attention examining The UMC’s position, suggesting possible futures where bolder statements about the value of animal lives might yet be considered.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, in the Fall of 2025 The UMC approved constitutional amendments that will allow for more equity between geographic regions of

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<sup>4</sup> Davies, interview. The revised Social Principle, which I share in full in Chapter 2, along with a history of how the language has changed over time, included the statement “Animals raised for human consumption should be provided with healthy living conditions and sufficient food and water. Animals raised for human consumption must likewise be reared in humane conditions and slaughtered in a manner that minimizes their overall suffering and pain.” This statement, Davies shared, represents an acknowledgement of global perspectives on animals in its breadth. The United Methodist Church, *United Methodist Social Principles*. The full “Caring for All Creatures” section of the Social Principles is also available at <https://www.umc.org/en/content/social-principles-the-natural-world>.

the denomination. Regionalization will both allow areas outside of the United States to have more equal status and power in the denomination, and the United States will for the first time be able to craft some legislation that applies only to the U.S. context. The regionalization plan will allow, then, for a possible U.S. adaptation of resolutions based on the “Caring for All Creatures” Social Principle that addresses the reality of abusive factory farming, perhaps even including a recommendation that people abstain from eating meat that comes from animals raised and slaughtered in such oppressive conditions. Even while regionalization creates space for contextualization, though, The UMC in the United States must remain committed to building nonhierarchical partnerships with the global denomination, accountable to continue unraveling colonial structures.

Beyond the potential for change *within* The UMC, I believe the work done to reframe the denomination’s social justice statements reflects a wider movement in mainline Protestantism toward understanding intersectional justice and the interlocking logics of domination.<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 5, some in the denomination who have been encouraged by recent changes related to LGBTQ+ inclusion and the adoption of the revised Social Principles are also calling for accountability in the work of dismantling the colonial structures that allowed exclusion and racist, U.S.-centric systems to thrive. To again draw on Christopher Carter’s language, if we understand the destructive power of theological anthropology that centers White male Western Christian ideology as the

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<sup>5</sup> In the Presbyterian Church USA, for example, the Presbyterian Mission Agency has been engaging in self-study and visioning work that seeks to apply decolonial principles and practices to its work, working toward an antiracist framework for denominational outreach. "Matthew 25 and Decolonization," Presbyterian Church USA, 2021, accessed 24 January, 2026, <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2021/10/19/matthew-25-and-decolonization>.

definition of what it means to be human, we must commit to unraveling this harmful worldview and replacing it with a worldview that places humanity in the entangled web of creation.

Transforming worldviews is no small task. At the conclusion of my research, though, I find myself deeply heartened by what I learned about the effectiveness of activism, even when a single person has a vision for social change. I write during a season where many people report feeling a deep sense of helplessness to respond to the powers of fascism that are ravaging the United States. Many people feel their actions of resistance, their participation in demonstrations and protests to fight back against a White Christian nationalist regime are futile, with no possibility of making a meaningful impact. What I encountered in my research was a different narrative. Through the interviews I conducted, through archival research, and through the scholarly partners with whom I have engaged, I heard several stories of persistent individuals, like Jeania Ree Moore and Jenny Phillips, who had a vision for change, for expanding the scope of social justice, who were able to impact bureaucratic structures at the highest levels of denominational hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> Moore, a former staff member at the General Board of Church and Society, encouraged the board to think about nonhuman animals in its advocacy, and helped GBCS establish a connection with Christian animal advocacy organization CreatureKind. Phillips, now an executive at the General Board of Global Ministries, founded the caucus group FossilFreeUMC, an organization which has shaped the denomination's conversation about ecologically ethical financial investments. The long-term impact of Moore's and Phillips' contributions is still uncertain, and their successes in effecting

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss Moore and Phillips in Chapters 2 and 4.

change are moderate, muted by an institutional *habitus* that resists transformation. Yet, these persistent individuals – and the people they gathered to work alongside them – were shaped by their Wesleyan heritage of social holiness that encourages ongoing reform. They pushed and stretched the *habitus*, even if a little. They were also shaped by, and in turn shaped, networks of people who refused the status quo and insisted on working to bend institutions toward new pathways.

This persistent reforming of unjust structures is the work of ethics, suggests Willis Jenkins. “One task for religious ethics over the next generation of this [*Journal of Religious Ethics*] is undoing and recomposing,” he writes.<sup>7</sup> For Jenkins, a critical task of recomposing ethics means questioning our very conceptions of humanity: “Religious ethics may have particular skills for exploring and recovering how, amidst sundering of relations, people have been continuously creating” what it means to be human.<sup>8</sup> He engages the work of religious scholar Graham Harvey on animism to think about personhood rather than humanity.<sup>9</sup> Harvey defines animists as “people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.”<sup>10</sup> Intermingling his own conclusions with Harvey’s, Jenkins writes that the religious ethics of interspecies relationships, with humans and other species in mutual relationships “would start from epistemic and political premises

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<sup>7</sup> Willis Jenkins, "Ethics after Humanity," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 51, no. 4 (2023/12/01 2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12457>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Harvey, "If Not All Stones Are Alive ...: Radical Relationality in Animism Studies," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Graham Harvey, "Introduction," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Routledge, 2014), xi.

of traditions and polities displaced by modern humanity, with potential for making better sense of all the kin, persons, actants, forces, forcings, and entanglements at work in making environments.”<sup>11</sup> Our concepts of “person” are too narrow, Harvey and Jenkins suggest, and our Western theological anthropologies have rejected ways of knowing, listening to, and being in relationship with our more-than-human kin, making an obstacle to the kind of entangled mutuality we need to flourish. In The UMC’s U.S.-centric colonial structures, we have failed to learn from alternative worldviews that cherish the interdependence of all beings. As Jenkins concludes, “A properly pluralist approach should explore how moral futures are being made by multispecies projects of inheritance, adaptation, and world-making,”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to argue that the moral future of the world depends on more than human contributions.

Considering the moral status and significance of other-than-human beings is a critical question in a season of rising authoritarianism that thrives in an atmosphere of absolute dualistic “us versus them” rhetoric. Over the last decade, during his election campaigns and during his time as President of the United States, Donald J. Trump has repeatedly used animalizing language to describe his many enemies. When reporter Catherine Lucey of Bloomberg News asked Trump a question he did not like, he told her, “Quiet, piggy.”<sup>13</sup> Undocumented individuals are a frequent target of his animalizing language. In a 2024 campaign rally, for example, Trump said of immigrants, “I don’t know if you call them people . . . In some cases they’re not people, in my opinion. But

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, "Ethics after Humanity."; Harvey, "If Not All Stones Are Alive," 483, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, "Ethics after Humanity."

<sup>13</sup> CNN, "Trump Snaps at Reporter's Epstein Questions: 'Quiet, Piggy'," (24 January 2026 2025). <https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/18/us/video/trump-snaps-reporter-epstein-quiet-piggy-digvid>.

I'm not allowed to say that because the radical left says that's a terrible thing to say."<sup>14</sup> After pushback to his rhetoric, he recounted at another rally the pleas he heard from Democrats: "Please don't call them animals. They're humans.' I said, 'No, they're not humans, they're not humans, they're animals.'"<sup>15</sup> This kind of rhetoric is typical for Trump and his supporters, and the fact that Trump feels comfortable using such language points to the troubling history that this dissertation has sought to highlight and address. This dehumanizing language that equates human beings with nonhuman animals in negative ways is and is *meant* to be degrading and harmful, just as when similar rhetoric is used to degrade and harm queer people in The UMC, as I described in Chapter 2.<sup>16</sup> The insulting attacks work because they rely on the lack of moral status, the lack of individual subjectivity of animals. If being an animal is to be worthless, then being called an animal is to be called worthless, thus changing the theoethical understanding of the sacred worth of animals is part of the work of intersectional justice.

Valuing the moral worth of animals must happen in tandem with *direct attention* to the ways racist animalizing rhetoric that is meant to degrade and dehumanize enables the perpetuation of discriminatory policies and a hostile society for people of color. Black liberation theologian James H. Cone writes,

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<sup>14</sup> "Trump Says Some Undocumented Immigrants Are 'Not People'," Washington Post, 2024, accessed December 16 2025, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/03/16/trump-immigrants-not-people/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Trump Calls Migrants 'Animals,' Intensifying Focus on Illegal Immigrants," Reuters, updated April 3 2024, 2024, accessed December 16 2025, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-expected-highlight-murder-michigan-woman-immigration-speech-2024-04-02/>.

<sup>16</sup> Trump employs derogatory language to belittle many groups, including queer and trans people, Black people, immigrants, women, disabled people, and others. See an analysis of his language in Jace Valcore, Nicole L. Asquith, and Jess Rodgers, "'We're Led by Stupid People': Exploring Trump's use of denigrating and deprecating speech to promote hatred and violence," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 80, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-023-10085-y>.

The logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy. People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological, whether they know it or not. People who struggle against ecological injustice but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists, whether they acknowledge it or not. The fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.<sup>17</sup>

The UMC has a moral obligation to make explicit the connections between racism and White supremacy, animalization, and ecological exploitation of the more-than-human world. Inattention to animals in mainline Protestant denominations is linked to inattention to the animalization of marginalized communities. The UMC (and mainline Protestantism more broadly) must unequivocally reject animalization, acknowledging the significant harm done to people of color, immigrant communities, the LGBTQ+ community, women, and other marginalized groups through degrading language that seeks to deny their humanity. I have frequently mentioned the importance of intentional listening as a strategy for better incorporating concern for nonhuman animals into an eco-justice theoethic. White environmentalists and animal rights activists (like myself) must also carefully listen to those who have been harmed by the animalizing logics of domination. As Aph and Syl Ko point out, our distinctive racial, religious, and cultural identities shape *how* we work to dismantle the exploitation and oppression of animals.<sup>18</sup> Seeking an

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<sup>17</sup> James H. Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?," *Sojourners*, 2007, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2007/whose-earth-it-anyway>.

<sup>18</sup> Ko and Ko, "Why Black Veganism Is More Than Just Being Black and Vegan," 53.

expanded vision for the value of animals in the eco-justice movement cannot be a demand that places the burden of decentering humans on those who have already been consistently decentered via racist and colonizing discourse and action.<sup>19</sup>

Trump’s animalizing rhetoric emphasizes the critical and present necessity of the work of this dissertation. Striving to deconstruct dualisms does not mean eliminating the category of “other” so much as it means learning to understand the category of *other* as an acknowledgement of difference between created beings. Whoever is *other* is a category of beings, of situated subjects who deserve compassion, care, and love. Within the category of *other*, there is always a rich diversity that is flattened in an us/other dichotomy. To draw on the most basic of Christian teachings, to care for the other is to care for ourselves. Embodying this teaching more fully is a foundation for a transformed eco-justice theoethic. In his preface to a book of hymns co-written with his brother Charles, John Wesley insisted that holiness cannot be found in isolation – only in community can one experience true holiness: To care for the other *is* to care for ourselves. In his preface to a book of hymns co-written with his brother Charles, John Wesley insisted that holiness cannot be found in isolation – only in community can one experience true holiness:

“Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. “Faith working by love” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. “This commandment have we from Christ, that he

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<sup>19</sup> Gillian Moise’s “Anatomy of Black Veganism” offers an insightful look into the complex burden that Black vegans and animal rights activists bear, managing the intersections of identities and oppressions. Gillian Moise, "Anatomy of Black Veganism: How People of African Descent Become Vegan, Manage Intraracial Vegan Stigma, and Contend With the Intersections of Anti-Blackness and Speciesism" (Ph.D., University of California, Davis, 2025) (32114085).

who loveth God love his brother also;” and that we manifest our love “by doing good unto all men ...”<sup>20</sup>

Wesley understood that relationship with God was only possible through relationship with each other. Further, Wesley explicitly included individual animal lives, even animals typically less cherished, in his concept of who is worthy of love and care. In his sermon “On the Education of Children,” he wrote that faithful Christian parents:

will not allow [their children] to hurt, or give pain to, anything that has life. They will not permit them to rob birds' nests; much less to kill anything without necessity, - not even snakes, which are as innocent as worms, or toads, which, notwithstanding their ugliness, and the ill name they lie under, have been proved over and over to be as harmless as flies. Let them extend in its measure the rule of doing as they would be done by, to every animal whatsoever.<sup>21</sup>

Wesley extended the primary commandment of loving others as we love ourselves beyond the human boundary and into the world of animals. I urge our careful attention to what kind of persons – human and beyond – we place in the category of other. As Carter says in the quotation that opens this conclusion, “There is no anti-oppressive way to deny the subjective life experience of another animal, human, or otherwise.”<sup>22</sup> Dualistic, binary thinking is a death-dealing framework that is wreaking environmental destruction and

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<sup>20</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739 (2020)), viii-ix, [https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/04\\_Hymns\\_and\\_Sacred\\_Poems\\_%281739%29.pdf](https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/04_Hymns_and_Sacred_Poems_%281739%29.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, "On the Education of Children," ed. Keith Millar, Ryan N. Danker, and George Lyons (Wesley Center for Applied Theology: 1783). A rephrasing of Wesley's words has been frequently misattributed to Wesley himself, even in denominational resources, and seems to be based on this sermon text. The original source of the incorrect citation seems to be a work by J. R. Hyland titled *God's Covenant with Animals: A Biblical Basis for the Human Treatment of All Creatures*, Lantern Press, 2000, xii. Hyland suggests that Wesley said “I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to the broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the Earth.” This language, however, is much too contemporary to originate with Wesley.

<sup>22</sup> Carter, "Race, Animals, and a New Vision," 79.

devastating human existence and well-being. We are responsible and response-able to each earth other. To attend to a world in peril, we must push beyond our human limits, drawing to the center the subjects with whom we share the planet.

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