Mission as Integral Ecology: Doing Theology at Bethany

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Abstract

Christianity’s reality in the global south where poverty, climate change, ecological degradation and marginalization are the daily, lived experience of the majority of the world’s population, presents theologians with a unique moment of challenge and opportunity for theological exploration, experimentation, and missiological innovation. This article explores and analyzes one such experiment, the Bethany Land Institute (BLI, https://bethanylandinstitute.org/) in Uganda. Inspired by Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, BLI promotes the concept and practice of integral ecology as a lens for missiological reflection. The article argues that integral ecology, as pursued at BLI, invites us to rethink the traditional themes of Christian mission such as conversion, love, spirituality, and ecclesiology. It also provides a new model of doing theology, one that is particularly appropriate in an era marked by World Christianity, and by the global ecological crisis.

Keywords


1 Introduction

A global demographic shift in the population distribution of Christians, away from the traditional heartlands of Europe and North America, to the global south of Asia, Latin America and Africa, has been taking place over the course
of the last century. This demographic shift is only part of the story, even though the numbers themselves are quite telling.¹ What is obvious is that “the coming of the third church,” a phenomenon predicted by Walter Bühlmann as early as the 1970s (1977), is ushering in changes that are not simply additive, but ecological (Allen 2009:17). In other words, it is not merely adding something new to Christianity as a global phenomenon; it is bringing about a holistic transformation, turning Christianity upside down in virtually every area. Among other things, this means that far from being a mission outpost, the global south is now becoming the locus of a fresh conversation about Christianity in its missional, theological, political and ecclesiological dimensions. In the wake of this transformation, the discourse on mission cannot proceed as usual, from within the same location of the global north. Nor can it proceed in the same methodological directions, or with the same assumptions and questions. Instead, the discourse must be grounded within the experience, reality, and life challenges of those whom Jenkins asserts are the typical contemporary Christian, the woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela, and explore from within her world the pressing questions and fresh possibilities of what it means to be Christian (Jenkins 2011:1–2).

Our contemporary world is structured by powerful economic, political, social, media, national and global forces, whose overall effect is to render millions powerless and exposed to various vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, lack of basic health care and housing. The current Covid-19 pandemic crisis has exacerbated these vulnerabilities while revealing other inequalities in our common home. As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres rightly notes, COVID-19 is like an x-ray that has revealed “fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built.” The pandemic, he notes, “has laid bare risks we have ignored for decades: inadequate health systems; gaps in social protection; structural inequalities; environmental degradation; the climate crisis” (Guterres 2020).

We find ourselves, therefore, in a world marked not only by a demographic shift in the Christian population, but marked also by global political, economic

¹ The number of Christians around the world has quadrupled in the last 100 years, from about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2.4 billion in 2020. While Christians make up about the same portion of the world’s population today (32%) as they did a century ago (35%), the shift in distribution is quite telling. In 1910, about two-thirds of the world’s Christians lived in Europe, where the bulk of Christians had been for a millennium. Today, only about a quarter of all Christians live in Europe (26%). The majority — more than a third — now are in the Americas (37%). About one in every four Christians lives in sub-Saharan Africa (24%), and about one-in-eight is found in Asia and the Pacific (13%). Center for the Study of Global Christianity. https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/.
and structural inequalities, and by various crises, including the global ecological crisis. All of these crises disproportionately affect the poor, most of whom live in the global south which today is home to the majority of Christians. This is what makes the theme of the 50th anniversary of IAMS, mission in a wounded world, especially relevant. What should Christian mission look like in such a wounded world? What does it mean to be a Christian, and experience and respond to the twin cries of the earth and of the poor? What resources can the Christian faith provide to understand and navigate the powers that shape the world, and respond to its many inequalities and vulnerabilities?

The demographic shift in the global Christian population comes, therefore, with new questions that require a reformulation of the basic tenets of Christian faith and practice. However, this is not the first time the Christian faith has negotiated such a shift, such a cross-cultural moment. Such a shift took place in the second century when Christianity moved out of its original Jewish homeland into pagan territory. This cross-cultural shift raised many questions, even precipitating a crisis for the original believers in Jerusalem who sensed themselves losing control over the boundaries of the faith. This crisis provided, however, a unique opportunity for Christianity to become a world religion, rather than remaining a sect within Judaism, as Dana Robert rightly notes (Robert 2009:14). The crisis also became a crucible for the theological experimentation and innovation that would eventually result in some of the most clear and rich expressions of Christian doctrine worked out at Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), and other councils of the early church.

Christianity now finds itself at a similar kairos moment, a similar moment of crisis and opportunity, precipitated not only by the demographic shift in the Christian population worldwide, but also by the global ecological crisis. The hope is that in response to this crisis, the global south should experience a rich ferment of exploration, experimentation, and innovation capable of mobilizing vision, practice, and insight from the Christian faith to respond to this urgent global crisis. The hope also is that these experiments from the global south will not only contribute in rich ways to the global conversation on how to care for our common home, but that they will also provide a new model for the theological task, for doing theology, a model that places ecology at the heart of Christian mission.2

2 I greatly share the sentiment of the Australian eco-theologian, the late Denis Edwards, and his invitation to tear down the walls that too often separate mysticism, theology, prophecy, poetry, and science. See Edwards (2006:1). What we need however, are concrete displays of what that might actually look like, and I hope BLI is one such example.
In this essay, I want to share the story of one such experiment, Bethany Land Institute (BLI) in Uganda. Inspired by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, BLI’s explicit mission is to form leaders in integral ecology for rural transformation. I will reflect on four themes or matters which provide the framework for BLI’s work: (a) curriculum, (b) land, (c) institutions, and (d) stories from Bethany. My reflections on these four themes provide an opportunity to highlight four corresponding dimensions of integral ecology at work in the BLI program. My overall goal is to bring the notion of integral ecology into sharper focus, and highlight its necessity, as well as its potential and benefits, as a lens for theological and missiological reflection in our time. As integral ecology is not merely a theoretical notion, but a praxis and a concrete form of engagement, this focus on BLI’s story helps not only to highlight integral ecology as a lens for missiological reflection; it also suggests that integral ecology provides a new model for the theological task as a whole. Implicit in my reflections here is the assumption that the notion of integral ecology not only invites a rethinking of traditional themes of Christian mission such as conversion, love, spirituality, and ecclesiology; it also calls for a methodological shift in African theology.

2 Bethany Land Institute (BLI) – An Experiment in Integral Ecology

In the summer of 2012, I asked my friend Cornelius for advice on where I could buy ten acres of land in Uganda. I wanted to plant a forest to replace the one that had been cut down near the home where I had grown up. I lamented that owing to the destruction of the forest, the freshwater spring had dried up, the land had become less fertile, and the village was experiencing an acute food and water shortage. Another friend, Tony, joined the conversation which soon turned to the broader questions of global ecological crisis, and the growth of slums as young people abandoned their villages to seek opportunities in the city. There was obviously a need for new educational programs that taught young people to care for creation, but also for new economic opportunities in the village where young people could earn a living while taking care of the land and protecting creation. We pooled resources, bought some land in the community, while continuing to research models and design a joint initiative that would combine what we now increasingly referred to as the three Es – ecology, education and economics.

Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’: On the Care for Our Common Home* not only highlighted the need for an urgent response to the ecological crisis; it suggested the notion of integral ecology as a fitting response to this crisis. Even though the notion of integral ecology is only explicitly invoked in Chapter 4 of the
encyclical, it is the central organizing concept of *Laudato Si’* (LS). It flows from an underlying assumption of the entire document, namely that everything is interconnected, everything works together in interconnected ecological networks and systems (LS 48, 56, 138, 142 and other places). Consequently, the natural environment cannot be considered in isolation. We are part of nature, so the social and the environmental belong together. “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139). As a result, “strategies for a solution demand an *integrated approach* (emphasis mine, EK) to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, while at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139).

This integrated approach involves not one but many ecologies. These include an economic ecology capable of appealing to a broader vision of human flourishing in which the protection of the environment is seen “as an integral part of the development process” (LS 141). Pope Francis also speaks of a social ecology which acknowledges that integral ecology is necessarily institutional and recognizes that “the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life” (LS 142). There is also a need to pay attention to cultural ecology in order to protect the cultural treasures of humanity, recognizing that culture is “more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present” (LS 143). Francis also talks about the ecology of daily life, through which we attempt to shape our environment to express our identity: in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and our neighborhoods. The ecology of daily life also consists of “those simple daily gestures which break the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness” (LS 230). Integral ecology also includes human ecology which creates bonds of social life within which the individual feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging (LS 148). Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, which is “the central and
What emerges from this brief overview of *Laudato Si’* is the crucial insight that integral ecology is neither a finished product, nor a technique, but a comprehension vision, a worldview, a broad and integrated approach that is able to bring together various approaches and ecologies. For this reason, Pope Francis notes that a fitting response to the ecological crisis cannot be limited to a series of actions and policy adjustments. “There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality” (*LS 11*). All these things taken together constitute integral ecology. Reading *Laudato Si’* for the first time in the fall of 2015, I was particularly struck by the inclusion of an educational program in the above conclusion. I assumed that the goal of the educational program would be to nurture and cultivate that distinctive way of looking at things, the way of thinking, the lifestyle, and spirituality of integral ecology. I began to reflect on what such an educational program would look like and whether Bethany Land Institute could be such a program. We already had the land, and we were desperately trying to come up with a program to bring together the three Es of ecology, education, and economics.

As I shared these insights from *Laudato Si’* with my two priest friends, it became clear that in *Laudato Si’*, we had discovered the mission of the initiative we had started working on without knowing clearly what it was that we were doing. In light of *Laudato Si’*, we set about formulating BLI’s mission and program as an educational program in integral ecology. We invited a few young people from the community to come and live on the land we had bought, in order to cultivate it using methods of regenerative agriculture. We shared with them biblical stories, especially the stories of Bethany, as I shall explain below, as well as insights from *Laudato Si’*. In the meantime, we set about gaining official status for Bethany Land Institute, making plans for the construction of a campus, and developing a curriculum for the institute, while all along gleaning insights from *Laudato Si’*. It is true that we did not know exactly what we were doing, and in many ways, we still do not know. Nevertheless, in the process of working on an institute for integral ecology, we are gaining a deeper clarity of the notion of integral ecology and its rich missiological import.

### 3 Mission and Integral Ecology: Four Matters

As I look back at the story and the work of BLI, four main themes of integral ecology emerge, and these are connected to the four areas which provide a
framework for BLI’s activities. Reflecting on these four themes or matters not only offers an opportunity to describe in more depth BLI’s efforts in the sphere of integral ecology, it also helps to make explicit the connections between BLI’s work and the notion of integral ecology. Such reflection will hopefully confirm the rich potential of integral ecology as a lens and method of missiological engagement.

3.1 Curriculum Matters: Integral Ecology as Conversion

BLI’s mission is to train and equip young people for leadership in addressing poverty, the care of creation, and the promotion of human dignity in the rural communities of Uganda. Education, therefore, is at the heart of this mission. BLI trainees are called “caretakers” to reflect the biblical mandate to “till and care” for the land (Gen 2:15). Caretaker trainees spend two and a half years in the training program which revolves around BLI’s three learning centers: Mary’s Farm, Lazarus Trees and Martha’s Market. Mary’s Farm is a teaching or demonstration farm where trainees gain skills in regenerative farming and sustainable agriculture. Lazarus Trees is a natural forest where trainees learn care for creation, conservation, and engage in a community outreach program of ecological education and reforestation. Martha’s Market is BLI’s business school where trainees learn principles of economics, commercial production, marketing, leadership, and operate a Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization (SACCO). At the completion of their two and a half years of training, caretakers return to their village communities to set up their farms which serve as an example and model of integral ecology. In this way, the hope is for BLI caretakers to become both leaders and change agents for sustainable livelihoods and creation care in rural communities.

In developing the BLI curriculum, we consulted widely through meetings and workshops that brought together different experts and leaders in curriculum development in the Uganda ministry of education, community leaders, local government offices in community development, environmental policy, farming experts, and priests working in spiritual formation (at the National Catholic Seminary). The result was an integrated curriculum that brings together theoretical learning, skills training, human and spiritual formation. The daily timetable reflects the integration. The day begins before breakfast with morning rotation which involves assigned work in one of the learning centers. Breakfast is followed by classroom learning where the topics range from systems science, biodiversity, agroecology, to native/indigenous methods of creation care, soil and water conservation and biblical foundations. A reading and discussion of the text of *Laudato Si’* makes up the bulk of the BLI Foundations course which everyone at BLI attends, including administrators,
staff, instructors and caretakers. After lunch, the instruction takes place in Mary’s Farm, Lazarus Forest, or in a Martha’s Market program, with the “incubators” (training staff) providing a hands-on training for the learners. The evening is dedicated to sports and other community activities which are followed by evening prayer before dinner. Community conversations take place every evening, providing caretakers with an opportunity to discuss topical issues affecting the community such as politics, sports, a talent show, or other issues in the news. Mass is celebrated every Wednesday, while on the other days, everyone is encouraged to attend the daily early morning Mass at the nearby parish church. Community engagement is an integral part of the program, and involves caretakers organizing research (listening) visits, as well as teaching and outreach activities for and in the community.

The BLI brochure makes clear that BLI’s program is not merely a training program. It is a formation program, the goal of which is not simply to impart information or simply develop skills, but to form “a unique lifestyle that ensures appreciation and conservation of God’s creation, as requirements for sustainable development” (BLI Brochure). The brochure also describes the formation in terms of optimizing “the integrated and interconnected functions of the head, heart and hands” (BLI Brochure).

The emphasis on formation in the BLI curriculum reflects an overarching concern for conversion. While conversion is an arguably constant theme in Christian mission and evangelization, in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis uses the term to refer to the need to care for our common home. The ecological crisis, he notes, is a summons to profound interior conversion: “What we need is an ‘ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around us” (LS 217). In this connection, Francis calls for the development of proper pedagogies that foster this ongoing conversion, and thus help people to grow “in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (LS 210).

The BLI curriculum and formation program seek to foster this conversion which must take place at the intellectual level of the head, the spiritual level of the heart, and the moral/practical level of the hands. Intellectual conversion involves learning to think differently about creation and about ourselves as members of the community of creation. This involves helping caretakers to learn to see nature not merely as a resource, but as God’s creation in which each creature is imbued with intrinsic dignity, and is a reflection of God’s own goodness. At the spiritual level, conversion involves the healing and restoration of what Francis describes as the “interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity” (LS 216). As most of the young people in the BLI caretaker formation
program come from poor and dysfunctional families, or have dropped out of school and are generally viewed as problematic or failures, many have serious personal questions about their identity and purpose in life. For instance, Madet (not real name) a sixteen year old boy had dropped out of school. He ran away from home and from the daily harassment and beatings from his step mom. He came to BLI initially looking for casual work. When the BLI caretaker formation program formally launched, the coordinator invited him to join the program by waiving the requirement for a High School certificate. The hope is that through the BLI formation program, young people like Madet will gradually come to discover their identity as loved, and gain a sense of purpose for their lives. At the moral level, the goal and duration of the program is to cultivate a lifestyle change, a new way of living shaped by virtues such as tenderness, gratitude, attentiveness, beauty and service of the common good. This is what at BLI is described as “discovering one’s hands” – what each individual can do to make a difference in the world. The three levels however go hand in hand, which again confirms the integral nature of conversion.

It is still too early to predict the full impact of BLI’s formation program: if, and to what extent it brings about these various dimensions of conversion. This will require a long-term study of the program and of the caretakers, even after they graduate. However, as I was talking last July to some of the caretakers who had been in the program for only four months, I was greatly encouraged by the emerging sense of confidence, the love and respect for creation, the sense of solidarity and concern for the community that I saw in the students. What is significant is that a concern for integral ecology and a call to conversion lie behind BLI’s efforts to rethink the educational system. We are concerned to move away from the traditional educational system’s way of pumping students with all sorts of facts and dates, which they are supposed to cram, memorize and reproduce. Instead, what we need are fresh pedagogies and approaches that promote student-centered learning, the goal of which is not merely training, but formation, cultivation of identity, of a sense of belonging, and of purpose in life.

3.2 Land Matters: Integral Ecology as Spirituality

The land has come to matter even more significantly at BLI than we had originally envisaged. Our initial interest in land was both ecological and economic. We were concerned by deforestation, overall ecological degradation, as well as the lack of economic opportunities in the rural community. A theological vision lay at the basis of our response. God loves the soil. According to Genesis chapter two, God not only fashions human beings out of the soil, God plants a garden, and gives humans the vocation to till and care for the land (Gen 2:15;
See Bahnson and Wirzba 2012:15–18 and Katongole 2018). We wanted to establish a land-based initiative in the rural community that embodied this theological vision, and also exemplified its promise: that if we take care of the land, the land will take care of us and produce all kinds of trees, “pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Gen 2:9). Consequently, we bought land in the village of Kiwumpa near Luweero, and invited some young people to become caretakers on the land. Our aim was that after the program they would return to their communities and practice the same patterns of land care they had learnt.

Not long after we obtained title to the land, we ran into problems as some in the community, including the very individuals that had sold us the land, disputed the land title, and others came out of nowhere to claim they were tenants or bona fide occupants of the land (Katongole 2022). We soon realized that the bottom line of all these bogus claims was money. They all wanted compensation. But the more people we compensated, the more came forward. We soon found ourselves involved in a protracted legal battle over ownership of the land, and thus part of the growing phenomenon of land disputes across much of Africa (Katongole 2022).

For the development of BLI, the land dispute was a major setback, and continues to be a stressful and distracting challenge. It has, however, resulted in unexpected gifts. The first gift was the partnership with the Diocese of Kasana Luweero, and the lease to BLI of over 300 acres of diocesan land at Nandere parish, to which the planned BLI campus moved from its original location in Kiwumpa. Another equally significant gift, although perhaps less tangible, is that through the land disputes we have come to a better appreciation of the spiritual dimension of land. This is because the land disputes were pointing to the shifting relationship with the land, in which traditional visions of the land as mother were rapidly giving way to a very modern notion of land as merely a resource and commodity. We soon realized that even those who claimed the disputed land as ancestral land were merely invoking the ancestral connection in order to extract a higher form of economic compensation. Government and international agency policies of land reform to foster development and a modern cash economy had succeeded not only in giving rise to endless land disputes, but in promoting an exploitative and extractive relation to nature in general, and to the land in particular.

A full investigation of the nature, causes, and extent of land conflicts in Africa is beyond the scope of this essay. However, my preliminary investigation (Katongole 2022:153–179) has confirmed that the land disputes are a symptom of a deeper crisis at the heart of Africa’s aspirations for modernity. This is the crisis of belonging, not unlike the one identified by Pope Francis at the beginning of Laudato Si’, “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of...
the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters" (LS 2). For Pope Francis, this is what makes the ecological crisis a spiritual crisis. As he notes, human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: “with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself” (LS 66). The rupture of these three vital relationships is what has transformed both our view of, and interaction with, nature, and led to an economic system built on a mentality of plunder. For a long time, Francis notes, our relationship with nature was based on acknowledging and “respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them. […] Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational” (LS 106). It is for this reason that Francis concludes that addressing this alienation requires more than technical and policy recommendations, as needed as these are. There is need for a spirituality to heal the rupture with the earth, and thus the rupture of the relationship with God, and between one another and God (LS 116). For as the Kenyan Nobel Prize Laureate and environmental activist Wangari Maathai rightly noted, “in degrading the earth, we degrade ourselves, and all humankind […] in loving and caring for the earth, we learn to love ourselves, and become grateful for who we are, even as we are grateful for the earth’s bounty” (Maathai 2010:17).

Spirituality is at the heart of BLI’s program. The goal of Mary’s Farm, therefore, is not simply to train caretakers in skills of sustainable agriculture, but it is a formation program in what we increasingly describe as the practices of listening – attentiveness to the land, to oneself, to others, and to God, which in turn develops a capacity for wonder and takes one to a deeper understanding of life (LS 225). In this connection, we find ourselves increasingly pointing to, and learning from, African native practices and wisdom concerning care for creation and for the land. What Leonard Boff says of Amazonian people, is true in many ways of African native peoples. Ancestral wisdom, enshrined in stories, taboos and myths, he notes, is built on observation of the universe and listening to the earth (Boff 1997:123). The overall significance of this ancestral wisdom is to encourage a mystical approach to nature, a view of nature as at once sacred and mundane, respect for nature, and a view of work as the collaboration of human beings with nature.

Unfortunately, under the assault of the colonial and modernizing technocratic paradigm, these native spiritualities continue to be dismissed or denigrated by use of terms such as pagan, primitive, and backward – with the underlying implication that they stand in the way of modern development. It
is now clear, however, that the fascination with modern development has only resulted in what Parenti describes as the “catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence, and climate change” (Parenti 2011:5) that we experience today. This is what BLI seeks to reverse by suggesting a different vision of development, one grounded within the African worldview, within the African soil. For if a deep sense of participation and belonging is at the heart of the African worldview, that world view is a spirituality which is inexorably connected to the soil, and more specifically to the land. The latter in many ways serves as a kind of umbilical cord – that links the past, present and future, the spiritual and mundane, the individual and the community, the earth, the world above and the underworld (Magesa 2015:222). Accordingly, our interest in the land at Bethany Land Institute is not merely an economic interest which views the land as a resource and economic asset. It is primarily spiritual. In this connection, we find ourselves in deep sympathy with the sentiments of the Ugandan sociologist, Betty Okot, who observes that in Africa:

Land means more than real estate. It isn’t just a slice of earth, which can be farmed, inherited, built on, sold or bought ... land equates to history, heritage, identity, belonging, rights and relationships. It creates social security and helps define social, cultural, religious values and belief systems. However, when these collide with the idea of commoditizing land, the people who live on and work the land suffer.


It is a similar sentiment that Pope Francis is voicing when he notes that for native and indigenous peoples, “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values” (LS 146).

This is why and how land has come to matter significantly at BLI as we seek to root, to use an agricultural metaphor, integral ecology as the church’s mission within the African soil, and within African spirituality. In doing so, we hope to foster an ongoing dialogue between Christian and native African spiritualities, between modern (Western) visions of flourishing and African sacred and mystic forms of land and creation care. While it might be too early and not even necessary at this stage to predict what the result of the dialogue will be, what is important is that through this land-based engagement of integral ecology we might witness the making of a church that is truly Christian and truly African.4

4 A similar concern for a church that is truly Christian and truly African is the theme of Odozor’s Morality, Truly Christian and Truly African (Odozor 2014). We however differ in approach, for
3.3 Institutional Matters: Integral Ecology as Social Love

A great deal of BLI’s efforts and resources have been spent on setting up BLI as an institution. This has involved, among other things: acquiring land, designing a campus, setting up structures, building dormitories and halls, incorporating the organization, hiring and training staff, setting up systems of management and accountability, running budgets, board meetings, fund raising, and filing financial returns. When we started, I did not realize that these efforts of institutionalization would come to take up so much time, and come to matter so significantly as we made various decisions. It is true that I had visited, was impressed by, and continued to learn from the efforts of other experiments in integral ecology like St. Jude’s Farm in Uganda and the Songhai Center in Benin (Katongole 2022:178–190). But I was either simply naïve or had underestimated the challenges involved in setting up and running an institution.

The decisions we had to make involved not only where to build the BLI campus, but also what sort of buildings and other issues. Even though from the start we settled on simple buildings and structures, we wanted their quality to reflect our commitment to the program, and the excellence we expected from both the staff and students. Thus, we engaged Engineering Ministries International (EMI) to work with a team of architects and engineers to help with site planning. When we entered a partnership with the Diocese of Kasana Luweero and decided to build the BLI campus at Nandere Parish, our commitment to quality deepened. We were encouraged not only by the number of parish institutions which already existed such as schools, a convent and a clinic, but by the parish church structure as well. The parish church was erected in 1890 as the first Catholic parish north of Kampala. As the church, built with local bricks and by local masons, was still standing and looking beautiful, this encouraged us to use the same type of local bricks and employ local masons. This allowed us to imagine BLI living on for more than a hundred years. We started thinking and talking about institutional longevity and sustainability.

As I reflect now on this commitment to beauty, excellence, and durability and, more generally, to the entire process of institution building, I see the connection between this hands-on work at BLI and my earlier work in political theology. The challenge of Africa, I argued in The Sacrifice of Africa, is a crisis of institutions – “the social and political institutions within which decolonized Africans have lived and tried to survive” (Katongole 2011:65). These institutions, whereas Odozor pins the catholicity of the church on a top-bottom, magisterium-sanctioned conversation, I am more concerned about the local, grassroots and ‘shade tree’ theologies and practices that reflect God’s revelation in history, which is to say, the ongoing story of God’s self-sacrificial love. In the end, the difference between Odozor’s and my approach is ecclesiological as we each have a different view of what the church is and her mission in the world. For more of this discussion see, Katongole 2016a:449–451.
I argued, have to be reimagined, and Christianity and the church in particular, can play a key role within this task of social reimagining. The reason behind this conclusion is that the story of God’s self-sacrificial love does indeed create something new. It “invents” new identities and new social realities in the world. My overall argument was that it is this invention of love that is the antidote to Africa’s violent modernity. I have not only put forward this argument at various times and places, but I have also shown that this reimagining is possible, and the different forms it takes, while highlighting its essentially social or political nature. Pope Francis is making a similar argument and thus offering integral ecology as an invention of love. He calls for an “integrated approach to fight poverty, care for creation and restore human dignity to the poor” (LS 139). Such an effort of integral ecology, he notes, is the true meaning of love or caritas. He writes:

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society, and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals, but also macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones.

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This conclusion points to the way that integral ecology is a form of politics, a form of social love. Consequently, Francis can argue that social love is the key to integral human development, “In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic, and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity” (LS 231). When viewed from this angle, BLI is an experiment in social love and, as such, a form of political theology. For as Francis notes elsewhere:

For whereas individuals can help others in need, when they join together in initiating social processes of fraternity and justice for all, they enter the “field of charity at its most vast, namely political charity.” This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity.

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This is the kind of political work that BLI is involved in. But this is also what has turned out to be one of the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of BLI: building structures and institutions that enhance solidarity and
institutionalize the kind of love – or caritas – that undergirds integral ecology. And yet, it is extremely necessary. It is required, or even commanded. Such commanded love spurs people to create more sound and supportive institutions. As Pope Francis notes, if one helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a commendable act of charity; but if one builds a bridge, that is an even more commendable act of love (FT 186).

Building a bridge is a fitting image for BLI’s efforts at institution-building and caretaking. We have been building the necessary structures that institutionalize, stabilize, and routinize love. This means that at BLI we are not only engaging in politics at its most basic level. We are involved in providing a redefinition of politics that is not the exclusive domain of state-sponsored, top-down bureaucratic policies of control and administration, but is instead constituted by everyday practices inspired by caritas. If the problem of modern Africa is the crisis of institutions, as I argued in The Sacrifice of Africa, that problem has to do with the story (power, greed, extraction – in a word, King Leopold’s Ghost) that drives modern Africa and shapes its key institutions (Katongole 2011). At BLI we are involved in reinventing this problematic modernity, grounded within a different story, and working out its social, practical, and institutional implications, while at the same time negotiating not only local dynamics, but church and nation-state institutional structures and bureaucracies. It is a daunting and painstaking task. But it is also an exciting task that allows us to see the limits and challenges and, most importantly, the thrilling possibilities of reimagining Africa’s future from within the story of God’s self-giving love.

3.4 Bethany Matters: Integral Ecology as Ecclesiology

The image and biblical stories of Bethany play a central role in BLI’s program. Not only is the entire program called Bethany Land Institute, each of BLI’s signature programs is named after a character from the Bethany story: Mary’s Farm, Martha’s Market, and Lazarus Trees. We use every available opportunity to share, reflect on, and discuss the stories of Bethany. A number of these stories are familiar, for example Martha who welcomed Jesus at her house, her sister Mary (Lk 10:38–40), and their brother Lazarus, all of whom lived at Bethany (Jn 11:1). There is also the story of Mary’s anointing of Jesus during a meal (Jn 12:1–8). There are other stories that are perhaps less familiar that are associated with Bethany, such as the story of the cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:11–12, Mt 21:17). Luke also tells the story of Jesus walking out towards Bethany after his resurrection, meeting his disciples, and commissioning them to go to the ends of the earth, as he himself is lifted up to heaven (Lk 24:50). What kind of place was Bethany? In 2012, I undertook a three-week research trip to Israel.
and Palestine in search of the biblical Bethany, and its significance during the time of Jesus’ ministry.

The trip culminated in *Stories of Bethany: On the Faces of the Church in Africa* (Katongole 2013), in which I shared what I had found, and reflected on its significance for the church in Africa. Today the village is called al-Eizariya, but in Jesus’ time Bethany was a village just outside Jerusalem on the other side of the Mount of Olives. It was where the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts of society lived – thus the name: *Beit anie* which means house of misery or poor-house (Katongole 2013:20–22). It is significant that this was the base of Jesus’ ministry in Judea, similar to Capernaum in Galilee. This is where Jesus always stayed, with his friends: Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Simon the Leper (Mt 26:6), rather than in Jerusalem where he never actually stayed. Biblical Bethany was thus a place of friendship, hospitality and service (Lk 11:38–40), of intimacy and of anointing (Jn 12:1–11), of resurrection (Lazarus: Jn 11:1ff), and of mission (Lk 24:50).

That Bethany was where Jesus found a home – a home with and among the poor – points to a crucial ecclesiological insight for Christians worldwide. Whatever else can be said about the southward shift of Christian population distribution, it is obvious that ‘the coming of the third church’ ushers in, descriptively at least, a church of the poor, where the typical Christian of the 21st century is a poor African woman or a woman living in a Brazilian favela (Jenkins 2011:2). This calls for a renewed appreciation of the church as a church for and of the poor. There is, Pope Francis notes, “an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, EG 42). Elsewhere, he has offered the image of a field hospital as a fitting image for the Church (Spadaro 2013, Katongole 2017). As a field hospital, the church always steps outside her institutional existence and finds new roads to the frontiers, to the margins, to the peripheries, in other words, to the Bethanys of our time. Pope Francis notes, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (EG 49).

The church therefore is always on mission – or rather, the church is mission. This mission consists, in the first place, of a mission of presence, learning to be at home in Bethany. Here, she recreates the same experience of love, intimacy, and anointing as Mary at Bethany. The mission also consists in service, not unlike Martha’s generous, innovative and dynamic leadership. In the third

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5 For an extended reflection on Pope Francis’ ecclesiology from an African perspective, see Stan Ilo (2018).
place, the mission consists of various forms of advocacy that create possibilities for everyday resurrection, initiating historical processes that allow the poor to reclaim their agency and become masters of their own destiny. In doing so, the church heeds the call to unbind Lazarus and let him go free (Jn 11:44).

This is what makes the church at Bethany, to use Pope Francis’ term, a social poet, and its ministry a form of social poetry (Pope Francis 2020:119) engaged in everyday practices that convert death into life, injustice and poverty into new possibilities clustered around the basic requirements of employment (trabajo), housing (techo) and food (tierra) (Pope Francis 2020:121). This is the significance of Bethany – an ecclesiological vision that undergirds, shapes and drives BLI’s efforts for integral ecology. Not that this full ecclesiological vision was entirely evident to us from the very beginning. When we named the initiative Bethany, our intention was simply to highlight the initiative’s presence among, and commitment to the poor rural communities, and the hope that the program would be able to nurture and cultivate a similar ethos and lifestyle as that exemplified by Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Jesus’ time. It has only been over time, in the very process of developing and working on a formation program for integral ecology, that we have been discovering the rich ecclesiological implications of the name Bethany which points to the church’s incarnational and, therefore, missional, presence and ministry in the Bethanys of our time.

4 Conclusion

Let me conclude with four brief observations. First, in this essay I have not only described the work of BLI, but reflected on four key theological themes connected to our work at BLI: conversion, spirituality, love, and ecclesiology. These are obviously key themes of Christian theology in general, and missional reflection and practice in particular. We hope that our exploration of these themes in the context of our efforts to practice integral ecology has shown that these traditional themes are still relevant, yet can nevertheless be reframed in the era of World Christianity and the global ecological crisis. At the same time, I hope our discussion has not only confirmed that integral ecology is a promising lens for missional reflection, but that it has also shed light on the richness of this concept and practice. Needless to say, the four themes I have outlined here do not exhaust the possibilities of understanding integral ecology from a missiological point of view. Nevertheless, I hope they provide a good starting point for further exploration and engagement.
My second point is that in the process of exploring the four dimensions of integral ecology, I have touched upon, even though I have not fully explored, a number of other themes: African culture, poverty and marginalization, agency, and institution building. This is neither the time nor occasion for a discussion of how integral ecology as a theological approach relates to other existing approaches in African theology. However, my brief reflection here points to a number of rich ways in which a focus on integral ecology connects to, and even illumines crucial insights from other approaches. For instance, the attention to African native spiritualities in connection with land is a good starting point for a lively conversation between integral ecology and African theologies of inculturation.6 Similarly, the focus on agency and empowerment in the BLI caretaker formation program reflects similar concerns within African women theologies, and African liberation theologies in general.7 The ecclesiological focus on Bethany does seem to confirm integral ecology as a promising paradigm for the new evangelization8 in the era of World Christianity and in the context of the global ecological crisis.

Thirdly, in the process of exploring the four dimensions of integral ecology at work at BLI, I have repeatedly noted that these dimensions were not as clear to us when we started. They are only becoming clear in the process of our work at BLI. This has greatly to do with the very nature of integral ecology which, much like peace, is not a theory, but a reality that emerges and can be fully grasped only in the very process of its praxis or engagement. As Denise Levertov notes in the poem entitled Making Peace.

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6 In a recent study, Richard Rwiza offers helpful suggestions on how the search for environmental justice and sustainability can be pursued in an African context, characterized by the traditional African religious outlook, solidarity, and the sacredness of life in all its many forms. See Richard Rwiza (2021). *Environmental Ethics in the African Context*. Nairobi: CUEA Press.


8 For my extended reflection on new evangelization in Africa and how politics is at the heart of this invitation see Emmanuel Katongole (2016). “The Gospel as Politics in Africa.” *Theological Studies* 77(3): 704–720. The claim here builds on and extends this argument by recasting the political challenge within a more comprehensive vision of integral ecology.
Peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making


This circular nature of integral ecology has far-reaching methodological implications as it points to the need for approaches that integrate theory and practice. The full implication of this insight means that the theologian cannot but become a scholar-practitioner involved in the practical task of theology; in this case, in the practical task of integral ecology, and reflecting on that very praxis. A theology arising out of such praxis cannot but appear both sketchy and provisional for it arises out of a praxis that does not lend itself to the mode of implementation, as is done with a theory or blueprint, but to the logic of enactment and of experimentation, which is the very essence of the poesis that Levertov points to. What our reflection here confirms, however, is that integral ecology not only offers an opportunity to rethink the practice of Christian mission and evangelization in our time, it is at the same time a method, a way of carrying out the task of theology.

Finally, the search for integral ecology is grounded in a story – the story of God's self-giving love. In describing this story, Paul uses the notion of reconciliation: God has been reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:17–19). The movement of God's reconciling love indeed involves the whole of creation. Even though creation waits with eager longing for the full realization of God's reconciliation, Christians, ambassadors of God's reconciling love, are invited to work for its realization in specific places and contexts. This involves learning to love a place and its peoples, and engagement with the everyday material realities of that place. For as Norman Wirzba and Fred Bahnson remind us, reconciliation is always connected to a place:

Rather than being simply the absence of violence, reconciliation takes us to a physical place – a plot of land – that puts down roots, produces food, provides stability and hospitality, fosters healthy relationships and inspires joy. Shalom presupposes people living securely in the land, which means that land and people together are being respected and nurtured.

Bahnson and Wirzba 2012:66

In the end, it is this learning to live in a place, this putting down roots in a place that is our common home, that integral ecology is all about. It is the story of
the incarnation of the God who came to dwell and put down his roots among us. That story of the God who came to dwell among us is at once the gift, the call and the mission of the church in the world.9

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Bethany Land Institute: bethanylandinstitute.org.


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9 As developed here mission as integral ecology shares much in common with the basic argument and outline of “integral mission” as developed by Rene Padilla and others in the Latin American context (see e.g. Padilla 2021; Chester 2002), but expands integral mission’s “twin wings” of evangelism and social justice by reading it through an explicit and necessary ecological lens.


Resumen

La realidad del cristianismo en el sur global, donde la pobreza, el cambio climático, la degradación ecológica y la marginalidad es la vivencia diaria de la mayoría de la población mundial, presenta a los teólogos con un momento singular de desafío y oportunidad para la exploración teológica, la experimentación y la innovación misionalógica. Este artículo explora y analiza uno de esas experiencias, la del Bethany Land Institute (BLI, https://bethanylandinstitute.org/) en Uganda. Este fue inspirado en la encíclica del Papa Francisco Laudato Si’, BLI promueve el concepto y la práctica de la ecología integral como una lente para la reflexión misionalógica. El artículo argumenta que la ecología integral, tal como se persigue en BLI, nos invita a repensar los temas tradicionales de la misión cristiana, como la conversión, el amor, la espiritualidad y la eclesiología. También presenta un nuevo modelo de hacer teología, uno que es particularmente apropiado en una era marcada por el cristianismo mundial y por la crisis ecológica global.
摘要

Missio Dei 已成为教会大多数分支中常见且受重视的表达方式。当我们使用这个词时，我们在多大程度上是指同一件事吗？本文探讨在当代公会和福音派背景下对 Missio Dei 概念的理解，特别强调《开普敦的承诺》和《共同迈向生活》这些文件。尽管在相对较短的时间跨度内，Missio Dei 经历了动荡的生活，定义多样，兴趣多种，但其用法似乎越来越趋同。这个共同点主要与从以教会为中心到三位一体的使命范式的转变，以及将上帝的国度理解为使命的目标有关。然而，这些文件存在差异，这些差异在它们对基督的中心地位和圣灵的角色的相对强调中显而易见的。