Concrescence: Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research
Vol. 3, No. 3, 2026, E-ISSN: 1595-9287

The Church and Environmental Pollution in Nigeria: A Theological and Ethical Appraisal

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Abstract
Environmental pollution is one of the ecological challenges confronting Nigeria, manifesting as plastic waste, air and water contamination, widespread land degradation, and noise pollution. While government agencies and development organisations have made various attempts to address this crisis, their efforts have yielded limited results. This study argues that the Church, given its theological heritage, numerical strength, and moral influence over millions of Nigerians, can contribute meaningfully to curb environmental pollution. Drawing on biblical teachings, official doctrinal and theological documents and relevant scholarly literature, the study adopts a qualitative research method using descriptive and analytical research techniques to evaluate the current state of the Church's engagement with environmental issues in Nigeria, and proposes some roles the Church can take up, which include environmental education, community mobilisation, advocacy and engagement with public policy on environment, and the modelling of sustainable practices within its own institutional life. The study acknowledges the challenges that have prevented the Church from engaging more fully with environmental concerns, which include theological misconceptions, organisational inefficiency, and limited financial resources. It concludes with recommendations for denominations, seminaries, and individual congregations, and argues that the Church's response to environmental pollution is ultimately a question of faithfulness to its own calling.

Keywords: Environmental pollution, Church, Nigeria, Stewardship, Ethics, Theology.

Introduction

Environmental pollution is one of the most pressing challenges currently facing Nigeria. Industrialisation, rapid population growth, poor waste management, and weak regulatory enforcement and frameworks have contributed to the environmental crisis, which now threatens public health, biodiversity, and long-term national development. The United Nations Environment Programme (2024) highlighted the severity of environmental degradation across Africa, with Nigeria among the most affected nations on the continent. The World Bank (2022) also maintained that Nigeria faces considerable climate and environmental vulnerabilities that permeate almost every sector of economic and social life.

Christianity is one of the dominant religions in Nigeria, with the majority of its adherents across the southern states. Its influence extends beyond churches and worship centres to individual attitudes, behaviours, and public discourse. Tucker and Grim (2017) observed that religious communities have the capacity to shape a wide range of societal values, including ecological values, because they operate at the intersection of belief, culture, and daily life. The Church, as a faith community and given its theological heritage, numerical strength, and moral influence over

a considerable number of individuals, can make significant contributions to social discourse. Yet, in the Nigerian context, the Church has been slow to leverage this ability to address environmental concerns. In view of this, the study examined the role the Church can play in combating environmental pollution in Nigeria. The argument here is that the Church, utilising its theological heritage, institutional reach, and moral authority, could serve as a credible and effective agent of environmental change. The study explores the theological and ethical foundations that justify such engagement, surveys the current state of environmental pollution and the extent of Church involvement in environmental matters, identifies the gaps therein, and, if any, proposes roles the Church can play to curb environmental pollution in Nigeria.

The study is significant because it attempts to combine two separate discourses: the environmental crisis discourse, which has tended to be dominated by scientists, policymakers, and development agencies, and the Church's internal theological and pastoral concerns. Bringing these two discourses into a productive dialogue is not merely an academic exercise. It is a necessary step towards demonstrating that environmental engagement is not peripheral to the Church's mission but is, in fact, central to its calling as a community of faith that is committed to the well-being of both humanity and creation.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the role of the Church in curbing environmental pollution in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Conceptualise the Church within the context of the paper and describe what constitutes environmental pollution.

ii. Describe the current situation regarding environmental pollution in Nigeria;

iii. Describe the extent to which the Church addresses environmental pollution in Nigeria;

iv. Establish the theological and ethical necessity of the Church's action in respect of environmental pollution in Nigeria;

v. Propose the Church's roles in tackling environmental pollution and outline challenges as well as workable responses in ensuring effective roles of the Church in addressing environmental pollution.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, using descriptive and analytical techniques. This is premised on the need for a contextual understanding of the concept of the church, a description of environmental pollution, and an overview of the current situation regarding environmental pollution in Nigeria. Sources of data for the study include the Bible and other doctrinal documents as primary sources, while existing literature on environmental pollution serves as the secondary source of information for the themes being studied.

Conceptual Clarifications

Environmental pollution is the contamination of the natural environment by the release of harmful substances into air, water, or land (Nwadinihu, 2024). Such contamination can be inimical to human health, threaten biodiversity, and disturb the balance of ecosystems. In Nigeria, environmental pollution manifests in several ways, such as the discharge of untreated industrial effluents into rivers and streams, indiscriminate waste disposal, open burning of refuse, open defecation, frequent oil spillage, especially in the Niger Delta region, and excessive emissions or exhaust from power generators that are a common alternative to the unstable electricity supply. Another indication of environmental pollution is the sporadic accumulation of plastic waste, which blocks drainage channels, contributes to flooding, and degrades the

aesthetic quality of both urban and rural environments. The Federal Ministry of Environment (2021) posited that one of Nigeria's most disturbing environmental challenges is plastic pollution. A troubling aspect of environmental pollution is that its consequences are often felt most severely by inhabitants of low-income communities who lack basic resources to protect themselves from environmental hazards.

The Church, in the context of this study, refers to the various Christian denominations and congregations that operate in Nigeria. It includes mainline denominations such as the Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist Churches, as well as Pentecostal and charismatic denominations that have significantly expanded in recent years. The study adopts this broad description because environmental stewardship is not restricted to any particular Christian denomination, and the teachings of these denominations are not fundamentally different from one another to the level of contradiction, despite subtle or nuanced doctrinal differences. The Church demonstrates a significant presence in Nigerian society and wields considerable influence on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of millions of people.

The nexus between environmental ethics and religion has also attracted scholarly attention over the years. Some scholars contend that religious traditions possess valuable moral and spiritual resources that can encourage responsible environmental behaviour. For instance, Gottlieb (2019) argues that religious traditions provide accounts, narratives, values, and ethical teachings that can inspire care for the natural world. In the same vein, Kearns (2016) maintains that religious communities usually motivate environmental responsibility through seriously held moral convictions rather than through legal obligations alone. This dimension is relevant in Nigeria, where religion serves as a powerful force that shapes individual and collective behaviour.

Environmental Pollution in Nigeria

Nigeria is endowed with natural resources and diverse ecosystems; its forests, rivers, wetlands, and coastal ecosystems, among others, portray some of the most biologically diverse environments on the African continent. However, poor environmental management, weak regulatory enforcement, and a desperation for immediate economic gains have placed immense pressure on these natural systems. The Nigerian Environmental Study/Action Team (2018) reports a steady decline in environmental quality across different sectors. Also, pollution, deforestation, and climate-related challenges continue to threaten sustainable development in the country, as indicated in the assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (2024).

One of the prominent aspects of the environmental crisis is air pollution. In many Nigerian cities, the quality of the air has deteriorated due to an increase in urbanisation, industrial activities, vehicle emissions, the practice of open waste burning and open defecation. The crisis becomes complicated because of the country's heavy reliance on petrol and diesel generators, which many households and businesses in Nigeria rely on due to an unstable electricity supply. Although these power generators provide an alternative source of electricity supply, they also release carbon monoxide and other pollutants that contribute to poor air quality. Such emissions, based on the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2023), form part of the broader environmental processes that cause climate change and its associated impacts across Africa.

Water pollution is another major environmental concern. In many parts of Nigeria, rivers, streams, and other water bodies are largely contaminated by industrial waste, agricultural chemicals, and untreated sewage. These practices have serious implications for public health and likewise threaten the livelihoods of people who depend on water resources for farming, fishing, and domestic use. The situation specifically becomes worse in the Niger Delta region, where aquatic ecosystems and agricultural land have been damaged for years due to oil spills,

thereby leaving communities that once relied heavily on these resources struggling with the long-term effects of environmental pollution. In recognition of these consequences, the World Bank (2022) observes that environmental degradation imposes enormous economic costs on Nigeria through reduced agricultural productivity, increased healthcare expenses, and the loss of valuable ecosystem services.

Plastic pollution is another environmental challenge. Discarded plastic materials are now a common feature of the landscape in markets, streets, drainage channels, and waterways. Improvements in waste collection and recycling systems have not kept pace with the massive use of single-use plastics. As a result of this, large quantities of plastic waste accumulate in the environment, thereby resulting in flooding, environmental degradation, and public health concerns, among others. Plastic pollution has been identified as one of the major environmental challenges of the contemporary era (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023); meanwhile, existing waste-management structures remain inadequate to handle the volume of waste generated across Nigeria, as acknowledged by the Federal Ministry of Environment (2021).

Noise pollution, though it receives far less attention in environmental discourse, is another dimension of the problem that cannot be entirely overlooked in a discussion that involves the Church. The sustained and often excessive use of public address systems and loudspeakers by churches and mosques in residential neighbourhoods across Nigeria has become a source of growing concern for many communities. Ogunsanya (2021) asserted that some Nigerian Churches are major contributors to noise pollution due to their failure to regulate the use of amplifiers during church programmes, which at times run late into the night or begin in the early hours of the day.

Apart from the physical manifestations, environmental pollution raises important ethical questions. It is not limited to a problem of technology, infrastructure, or government policy. It reflects the choices and attitudes of humans toward the natural world. Natural resource use and consumption, waste disposal, and people's relationship with their environment are shaped by underlying values and beliefs. These values are moulded by cultural traditions, social practices, educational experiences, and religious teachings. Consequently, environmental degradation should also be understood as an ethical issue that requires moral responses. This recognition creates important avenues for the Church, whose teachings and influences extend into the everyday lives of millions of Nigerians, to address environmental concerns. The Church, in this regard, should not be an onlooker but should serve as a potential agent of environmental responsibility and ethical transformation.

Theological and Ethical Foundations for Environmental Stewardship

A discussion of the Church's role in curbing environmental pollution requires a demonstration of the theological and doctrinal bases upon which action is expected from the Church. In addition to the Bible, which is the foundational basis for churches' doctrinal and theological teachings, there are churches' official teachings on environmental care. These include denominational teachings like those of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, and Eastern Orthodox Church; doctrinal teachings at the continental and ecumenical level like that of All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC); doctrinal teachings at the global level like that of World Council of Churches (WCC); and those of some theologians within Nigeria. The content of some of these doctrinal and theological teachings is briefly described in this work.

The most foundational of these doctrinal and theological resources is the Biblical doctrine of creation. The earth and all that it contains are portrayed as the handiwork of God, and are declared good in their own right and entrusted to human beings, not as owners but as stewards, as presented in the opening chapters of the Bible (Gen. 1:26-31; Gen. 2:15). The concept of stewardship, that is, the idea that human beings are caretakers of a creation that ultimately

belongs to God, carries profound ethical implications. This implies that the destruction or pollution of the natural environment is not a mere social problem; it is a moral and spiritual failing within the framework of Christian theology (Rev. 11:18). Tucker and Grim (2017) argued that this understanding of human beings as embedded in nature, rather than sovereign over the natural world, provides a sound theological basis for ecological responsibility.

The New Testament extends this foundation in significant ways. The Apostle Paul's vision of creation groaning and longing for redemption in Romans 8 can be interpreted as an indication that the natural world is not peripheral to God's redemptive purposes but is caught up within them. This interpretation challenges any narrow view that Christianity concerns itself only with individual souls and has nothing to say about the physical world in which those souls live. Jenkins, Berry, and Kreider (2018) noted that across Christian traditions, there is a growing recovery of this more complete theological vision, one that takes the well-being of the whole of creation into account.

In the Catholic tradition, Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) represents a direct and influential statement of Christian ecological theology. The Catholic Pontiff, in this document, argued that caring for the environment is a moral and spiritual responsibility. He used the concept of "integral ecology" to explain the inextricable links among environmental protection, human well-being, social justice and economic development. This indicates that the Catholic Church recognises the care of the environment as a fundamental responsibility expected of Catholics. The idea is rooted in the theological conviction that creation is a gift and that human beings have a responsibility to tend it wisely. While *Laudato Si'* is a Catholic document, its arguments provide a framework that is theologically compelling and practically useful for all Christians.

The doctrinal and theological teachings of the Anglican Communion are expressed in the *Five Marks of Mission* of the Anglican Church. The document, which was developed in the 1980s, contains a broad framework of the Anglican Communion's mission in the world. An essential component of the Anglican Church's mission in the world is the fifth item, which emphasises the need to safeguard the integrity of creation and the renewal of life on the earth. This Anglican blueprint on the role of the church in the world affirmed that environmental care is inseparable from other mission areas such as evangelism, justice and service. Care of the environment in the Anglican Church is interpreted as an expression of faithful Christian witness in the world (Anglican Consultative Council, 2012).

In a similar vein, the largest ecumenical organisation of Christian Churches in Africa – the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), founded in 1963 – also teaches about the necessity of the care of creation and further emphasises the need for churches to integrate environmental stewardship into their mission in the world via education of members of congregations, supporting climate-resilient policies, and promoting ecological justice (Mwombeki, 2024, All Africa Conference of Churches, 2025,). This positive disposition to human stewardship of the earth and care of creation, rooted in recognition of the earth as God's creation and the charge for churches to combat environmental pollution (World Council of Churches, 1992), was also emphasised by the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation programme, an initiative of the World Council of Churches launched in 1983.

Within the African context, theological reflections on creation and ecology have also been gaining ground. Egunjobi (2019) observed that African religious thought, including African Christianity, has traditionally maintained a strong sense of the interconnectedness of human beings, the community, and the natural world. This indigenous theological sensibility can enrich and deepen the Church's ecological ethics in ways that feel culturally appropriate when brought into conversation with biblical and systematic theology. Achunike, Nche, Okoli, and Diara

(2017) argued along similar lines, calling for a contextualised theology of creation that speaks directly to the environmental realities facing Nigerian communities.

It is evident from the above that there are official doctrinal teachings regarding environmental care and stewardship among Christian denominations. It was also observed that, while there are some variations in emphasis, there are no fundamental differences in the theological viewpoints of different denominations regarding environmental care. This indicates that there are reliable theological foundations that could provide leverage for the Church to play an active role in promoting care of the environment, thereby limiting environmental pollution.

The Church in Nigeria and Environmental Engagement

Churches' engagement in environmental matters remains significantly low in Nigeria, though there are encouraging signs worth acknowledging in the Church's efforts to curb environmental pollution. It was observed that some church leaders and denominations, particularly the Catholic Church, in Nigeria have begun to incorporate environmental themes into their preaching. Evidence for this is found in Nche (2023), which reports that church attendance can positively influence environmental awareness. This suggests that some congregants may learn about environmental issues from the preaching of church leaders, which subsequently influences their perceptions and actions regarding the environment. Ottuh (2022) takes cognisance of the efforts being made by some Christian communities to mitigate the problem of indiscriminate refuse disposal, which has to do with mobilising congregation members to participate in clean-up exercises and to adopt more responsible waste disposal habits.

In addition to the inclusion of environmental themes in preaching, there are reported instances of a few churches that work towards ensuring that their premises are green and eco-friendly. They do this by planting trees, reducing plastic use, and incorporating environmentally oriented messages into their Sunday school and youth programmes. Ogunsanya (2021) noted that the above are examples of local environmental initiatives influenced by church communities, and that such efforts are largely isolated and lack the coordination and sustained commitment needed to produce lasting change.

Despite the positive examples, there exists a much more troubling pattern. Nche (2020) observed that many church leaders in Nigeria often consider environmental issues to be outside the scope of the Church's core spiritual mandate. This is premised on the theological culture dominant in many Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic denominations, which tend to emphasize spiritual warfare, prosperity, personal salvation, and miraculous intervention, while giving little or no regard to environmental concerns. Achunike, Nche, Okoli, and Diara (2017) reported that some Church leaders actively resisted the idea that environmental engagement was part of their calling, viewing it as a distraction from what they regarded as the more urgent business of evangelism and church growth. This resistance, it must be said, is not unique to Nigeria, but it is particularly pronounced in a context where prosperity theology has taken such firm hold and where the urgency of spiritual needs is felt so acutely.

According to Okore (2024), the gap between what the Churches profess in theology and what they actually do in terms of environmental action is a serious credibility problem. A church that preaches the goodness of God's creation at one time, but tolerates or ignores the pollution of that creation at another, contradicts its own witness. Onuorah (2024) similarly observed that despite the high density of Churches and the pervasive influence of Christianity on social life in South-Eastern Nigeria, environmental practices among church members did not differ markedly from those of the general population. Onuorah's findings suggest that whatever environmental awareness may exist within the Church has not yet translated into consistent behavioural change at the congregational level. These are indications, as pointed out by Eluu (2015), Ottuh (2022), and Isaac et al. (2024), that the focus on environmental teaching is still underdeveloped across Nigerian churches.

Repositioning the Church in Nigeria as an Agent of Environmental Change

In view of the reliable doctrinal and theological foundations for the Church's active role in curbing environmental pollution in Nigeria, and the low level of the Church's engagement in environmental concerns, this work proposes the roles the Church in Nigeria can play to limit environmental pollution.

The first, and perhaps most immediate, role the Church can play is environmental education. Congregants gather in their churches regularly, sometimes multiple times a week. This provides an opportunity for shaping knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. The Church in Nigeria can function as an avenue for environmental education, where members can be provided with accurate information about environmental pollution and its consequences. This kind of education need not be dry or didactic. It may take the form of sermons, drama presentations, group discussions, and publications in church bulletins, all of which are already part of the rhythms of church life in Nigeria. When environmental knowledge is presented within a framework that members already trust and find meaningful, it is far more likely to be received and acted upon.

The needed doctrinal and theological bases for doing this are already provided in the official teachings of various Christian denominations and/or their parent bodies. The challenge of treating environmental pollution as a peripheral issue or a distraction from the real business of the Church, as observed among some church leaders by Nche (2020), does not fit into the existing biblical, theological, and doctrinal framework of churches. As such, a more fundamental shift is required in the Church's understanding of its position on environmental care, towards a biblical, theological, and doctrinal vision of creation care as integral to Christian faithfulness.

Another challenge to the focus on environmental education is the disconnect between environmental knowledge and behaviour. Even in congregations where environmental awareness exists, translating that awareness into changed behaviour is not automatic. As such, the Church needs to develop pastoral and educational approaches that will actively support the translation of environmental values into daily practice.

The second role involves advocacy and engagement with public policy. The Church in Nigeria has a history of speaking out on policy issues in the social, political, ethical, and economic spheres of society when it chooses to do so. Environmental policy is an area where the voice of the Church is needed to address issues relating to environmental pollution. Environmental governance in Nigeria suffers from weak enforcement, inadequate funding, and limited civil society pressure, among other issues. The Church, with its numerical strength and moral standing, is in a position to add its weight to calls for stronger environmental legislation and implementation of environmental laws, better waste management infrastructure, and more accountable governance of natural resources. This kind of advocacy does not require the Church to become a political body; it requires only that the Church take seriously its prophetic responsibility to speak on behalf of those who are suffering, including those suffering the consequences of environmental destruction.

A third role the Church can take up is community mobilisation. A number of practical responses to environmental pollution, such as cleaning up neighbourhoods, planting trees, maintaining drainage systems, and reducing open burning of waste, are things that require organised community effort rather than individual action. The Church is one of the few institutions in Nigeria with the institutional reach and organisational capacity to coordinate such efforts at all levels and there is every reason to believe that such efforts could be scaled up and made more systematic with the right level of institutional commitment. The Church's existing networks of small groups, parish councils, and youth fellowships provide ready-made structures through which environmental action can be organised and sustained.

A challenge to the prospects of community mobilisation for environmental programmes is organisational inefficiency. Even when individual church leaders are sympathetic to environmental concerns, translating that sympathy into institutional action is rarely straightforward. Churches in Nigeria, as elsewhere, are complex organisations with competing priorities, limited staff capacity, and governance structures that can make change slow and difficult. To organise environmental programmes, there is a need for adequate planning, resources, and commitment, all of which may be lacking or may not be enough in some churches.

A major challenge to achieving this is limited financial resources. Implementation of environmental programmes requires financial resources, whether for training, materials, equipment, or coordination. As such, some Nigerian Churches, especially small congregations in rural and semi-urban areas, which operate on tight budgets, may genuinely lack the resources to add environmental programmes to their existing commitments. This is a practical constraint that the proposal for the Church's environmental programmes must take into account. However, it is worth noting that not all forms of environmental engagement require huge financial resources. Preaching on various dimensions of creation care, incorporating environmental messages into existing programmes, and mobilising members for community clean-up exercises can all be done at minimal cost. The question of resources is real, but it should not be an excuse for inaction.

A fourth and equally important role is that of modelling sustainable practice within the Church's own institutional life. There is a principle, well recognised in both ethics and education, that institutions teach most powerfully not by what they say but by what they do. A church that installs solar panels, manages its waste responsibly, plants trees on its premises, substantially minimises noise pollution, and reduces its own plastic consumption sends a message to its members and to the wider community that environmental care is not merely a theoretical concern but a practical commitment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study attempted to establish that the Church in Nigeria has the ethical responsibility, theological mandate and institutional capacity to play meaningful roles in combating environmental pollution. The environmental crisis Nigeria faces is beyond what the Church should merely observe from a distance. It is a crisis that affects the very communities the Church serves and, as such, demands a response grounded in the Church's doctrinal teachings on creation, justice, and human responsibility. The theological foundations for such a response are available. The biblical doctrine of stewardship, the vision of creation as God's gift entrusted to human care, and the official doctrinal teachings of various Christian denominations all provide the Church in Nigeria with a compelling rationale for environmental engagement. The challenge, as such, is not finding theological justification, but mobilising the will and the structures to act on what the theology already demands. The study therefore concluded that the Church in Nigeria possesses the institutional capacity to contribute to efforts to curb environmental pollution. Proposals for the actualisation of this include a large-scale embrace of environmental education, pronounced advocacy and engagement with public policy on the environment, community mobilisation at all levels of the Church's organisation, and the modelling of sustainable practices within the Church's own institutional life. Practical constraints to these proposals were highlighted and solutions to these were explained with the conviction that the obstacles are not indications of impossibilities.

Based on the foregoing analysis, this study offers the following recommendations.

1. Church denominations and their leadership bodies in Nigeria should develop clear and explicit environmental policies that set out their commitment to creation care and provide guidance for congregations on how to implement that commitment in practical terms. Such

policies need to be more than statements of intent; they need to be accompanied by accountability mechanisms and resources for implementation.

2. Theological seminaries and Bible colleges in Nigeria should infuse environmental ethics into their curricula as a standard component of pastoral and theological training. Future Church leaders need to be equipped with a theological framework for creation care that is as well developed as their training in evangelism, pastoral care, or Church administration. Without this, the tendency to treat environmental issues as peripheral to the Church's calling will continue to reproduce itself from one generation of church leaders to another.

3. The Church should actively partner with government environmental agencies, civil society organisations, and community groups in addressing pollution at the local level. The Church does not need to act alone, as collaboration with other actors will extend its reach and effectiveness. Nwachukwu (2024) has highlighted the importance of engaging broad stakeholder participation in solidifying environmental governance in Nigeria. The Church is therefore expected to contribute to this, as it is in a position to do so.

4. Congregations should be encouraged to take practical environmental actions in their communities by starting with what is within their reach in terms of responsible waste management, tree planting, reduction of plastic use, plastic recycling, and advocacy for cleaner neighbourhoods. These actions may seem modest, but they carry symbolic and educational significance that goes beyond their immediate material impact.

5. The Church in Nigeria needs to recognise that its credibility on environmental issues will ultimately be judged not by what it says but by what it does. Churches that preach or teach about the goodness of God's creation while tolerating pollution within and around their own premises will likely not be taken seriously as agents of environmental change. The call is not simply to add environmental language to existing church programmes but to undertake a genuine re-orientation of priorities, one that takes creation care as seriously as it takes evangelism, worship, and pastoral ministry.

The pathway to an effective response from the Church to environmental pollution may not be straightforward. But for the Church that draws its identity from a tradition that insists on the dignity of every human being and the goodness of the world in which they live, environmental responsibility is not an option; it is a matter of faithfulness to its vocation.

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