

# Christian Environmentalism

## *An Ecotheological Approach to Earth Keeping*





### **WWF-PACIFIC VISION**

It is our mission to ensure that the richness and resilience of our Pacific island ecosystems are managed and conserved in harmony with the aspirations and sustainable development needs of our people.

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These bible tracts are part of the WWF-Pacific Sustainable Seafood Project, which is a partnership between the New Zealand Aid Programme, Le Cordon Bleu New Zealand Institute and WWF-New Zealand, working to secure the wellbeing of coastal communities in Fiji through sustainable fishing.

The tracts build on the Methodist Church in Fiji's strategic approach to environmental stewardship as outlined in the church's Pillar 12 on Christian Stewardship and Other Creations addressing the wise, Godly and sustainable use of our natural resources.

Published in September 2018 by WWF-Pacific, World Wide Fund for Nature, Suva, Fiji.

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ISBN: 978-982-358-014-2



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# Rereading the Bible in the New Inclusive Theological Mindset

## Introduction

**T**hese tracts is the work of the Methodist Church in Fiji and WWF-Pacific in an attempt to address the 12th Pillar of the MCIF Connexional Plan that calls Methodists' to Christian Stewardship and Environment Consciousness.

The stewardship role of Christians is a fundamental base of the Christian faith yet has often been taken for granted when the emphasis of human beings as apex of creation has been the central thrust of theological exploration and discussions. This has etched a presumption that human beings are the centre of the universe and all creation are geared to serve us. This encouraged the exploitative and abusive attitude and lifestyle of human beings that has resulted in our present predicament of global warming that is threatening terrestrial and aquatic existence.

The adverse weather pattern due to climate change and global warming is anthropogenic, meaning that human beings are the cause of all this. Our excessive "carbon footprint" in our attempt to satisfy the gluttonous behavioral lifestyle has increased global warming. The quest to satisfy human hunger has driven man beyond fundamental needs to excessive wants that perches greed in the psyche of humankind throughout the age.

This lifestyle has become the norm due to the disconnection of human beings from God that was first displayed in the rebellious attitude of our ancestors in what is better known as "Sin" (Genesis 3). This self-centered attitude has raised an exploitative and abusive spirit that has influenced all known principles to support the centrality of human beings and the exploitation of all creation to serve and benefit human existence.

Our present dilemma on the threat of global warming and climate change calls us to theologically critique the present realities and identify how God is revealing the Divine Self and Will to address the present threatening conditions for the better. The present threatening conditions compels us to the crux of this work as we are called to re-examine our divine calling in the light of God's universal plan. In the light of this necessity, we are to critique the word of God (Bible) in a deeper and new approach where we are called to re-read the Bible in an open and inclusive spirit where we are to consider the concerns and will of God on creation holistically.

This new exercise of re-reading the Bible will shift biblical exegesis away from the anthropocentric approach to a universalistic approach. This exercise will challenge us to re-look at the presumptuous biblical exegetical approach that encouraged all exploration, analysis and interpretation on human beings alone and embrace the significance of God's holy word interacting and engaging with creation and environment within the universal purpose of God. Indeed this will be a new approach and it will definitely be disturbing as it shifts away from the norms of classic theology.

I wish to open this observation by defining John 3:16 as example of the re-reading of the Bible in this exercise; *"For God so loved the world... He gave his Son... that whoever believes in Him .... inherits eternal life"*; this implies that God loved the whole wide world, inclusive of all creatures (sea, earth and air) and any creature that is able to respond to the Son will inherit eternal life. So the saving power of Christ is for all living things that can respond to God.





## THE WORLD IN THE STATE OF SHALOM & SABBATH

**O**ur first observation will focus on the state of the earth and heaven as in the state of Sabbath or Shalom of God. This highlights the relationship or connection between the Creator and the created when it was perfect and intact. In the creation epics of Genesis we see the sequence of creation and the proclamation of God announcing that “it was good”; the culmination of this creation acts was the creation of human beings. After all these acts of creation, the satisfaction and contentment of God saw the proclamation of “it is very Good”.

The contentment and satisfaction which God attained was due to the fact that all creation and the Creator were in harmonious coordination. This sense of satisfaction due to the harmonious connectivity brought a sense of rest which can be equated to the Sabbath or the Shalom of God.

Therefore the idea of the Sabbath of God in Genesis is the rest/peace/ contentment that is experienced when the creator and creatures relationship is intact. It is different from the Mosaic/Sinaitic Covenant Sabbath of the wilderness experience as that was a Divine orientation of God’s laws to God’s people after four century of bondage and slavery. So the Mosaic Sabbath is like a re-introduction of the Sabbath of God to a people who have lost all connection to the true meaning of Sabbath. The Sinaitic Sabbath is a re- introduction of the observance of Sabbath which is a progressive process in line to the divine intent that is to be the Sabbath and Shalom of universal existence. The world in the state of Shalom and Sabbath as seen in Genesis before the fall is the true status of universal existence as all creatures understand their respective roles and engage and display their roles to the best of their ability for the common cause and good of terrestrial existence.

In this state, human beings remain within the perimeters of his/her divine calling which is to have dominion and Lord over creation whilst in the image of God therefore displaying grace, mercy, compassionate care and concern to all living things. As human beings display these God-given characteristics, the state of Sabbath and Shalom is maintained and all things are also aware of their roles as designed and ordained by God.

This is the paradise of God where all things coexist in the great harmonious symphony call life. In this state, all things coordinate in such a wonderful manner that all are contented and satisfied and tranquility, serenity, peace and joy is the culture of all existence. This is the universal paradise, the universal Sabbath and the universal state of Shalom that God has created to be the Eden where human beings dwell to fellowship and commune with God and in the height of Man’s fellowship all other living things find peace as human beings are dictated by God to take care of other living things according to God’s purpose thus the exploitative and abusive mindset is removed and the love of the Lord controls and regulate our relationship with the world. In this state of Sabbath and Shalom (rest and peace), we maximize our potentials as we live for others as the Spirit of God dictates us to do so, our own interests becomes secondary as our primary concern is for the other (neighbor and environment) and we each commit and dedicate our strength and life for the betterment of others. Remember when we talk of others in this new understanding of re-reading the Bible, we are inclusive of all living things (earth, sea and air and all things that are in it). We will explore more on this when we discuss the tract on restoration and salvation.

### **Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *Define your understanding of “it is very good” as spoken by God at the completion of all creation acts.*
2. *In the light of this new understanding of connectivity of Creator and creation what does “Rest” mean?*



## The State of Sabbath and Shalom Maintained

**T**he issue of maintaining the Sabbath and Shalom remains in the fact that human beings keep the “Imago Dei” intact in our lives. Let us explore the issue of the image of God in the new understanding of re-reading the Bible.

### The Image of God

Human beings (man) were created to be in the image of God; God in this understanding is spirit so the physical component of Man (Body) is secondary when we speak of the “image of God”; the image of God is more on the spiritual component of Man thus we are more focus in the spiritual attributes and characteristics of God when we speak of the image of God in Man.

As we focus on this topic I wish to highlight that this image of God applies to both male and female therefore the gender issue is irrelevant when we speak of the “image of God” and this is where the inclusive understanding begins to challenge us and awaken our hearts as we begin to discover our equal standing as human beings (male/female) created in that manner by God.

This an interesting dimension of the image of God as it challenges the promotion of patriarchy dominance that seems to be the common world view that encourages the mistreatment of women and unconsciously promotes what we are constantly reminded of as gender based violence. Let us continue to understand that in re-reading the Bible, the gender issue becomes non-issue and the equality status slowly dwells in our understanding thus transforming our perspective on this issue.

The image of God highlights the relational characteristic of God as we are created to be and in this state we are able to find our relational links to all living things. This relational characteristic endows human beings with the ability to relate with nature in a positive manner where the elements of coexistence of terrestrial existence are brought to the forefront.

The relational aspect of human existence is a fact that cannot be denied for our interdependence is understood in the ecosystem chain and the role of human beings in this chain is far much greater because the image of God in man is personified in the physical and spiritual components that makes us human beings. The breath of God and the dust of which we are made of encompasses the divinity and the humanity of life and this is the heart of why human beings are significant for we are entrusted to uphold the link that holds fast the divinity and the humanity of existence. Thus the assignment of having dominion over creation is only possible when we are in the image of God. In this understanding we are therefore called to take care of creation in a manner that is in accordance to God, anything less is sin and that calls for repentance.

The image of God also highlights a unique feature when God proclaimed the equal standing of male and female as both are in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This piece challenges the understanding that seems to lean on the disparity that male is superior to female which often promotes the patriarchy dominant mindset that is exploitative and abusive towards women.

The image of God in the re-reading of the Bible encourages the understanding of equality in diversity of male and female in the divine plan of God. Taking into account the present gender issue that is global, we are encouraged to embrace in this observation the truth of the equality of male and female as they are both in the

image of God. All God-fearing people, all believers have to accept this fact, acknowledge and practice this embracing nature of this equality by upholding the dignity and respect due.

The recognition of other living things begins with the human acceptance of our gender equality and slowly moves across ethnic and religious borders and then to other living things and environment. This is the relational characteristic of our life that needs to be displayed in our relationship with the world, with people, with environment, with other living things.

The relational character that we are describing here is best defined by Martin Buber in his classic; “The I and Thou Relationship,” which encourages us to have an “I-Thou” relationship with the world (others) rather than the “I-It” relationship which perceives the world (others) as inferior. The I and Thou relationship recognizes, acknowledges and respects others in a manner that considers others as equal in standing in the presence of God. The “I-Thou” attitude will definitely encourage our vigilance not to intrude and violate the spaces of others who also have every right to live whether they be animal, fish or plant, all living things have to be respected and acknowledged as God’s and they are to be treated as such.

Universal Sabbath and Shalom can only be maintained when our mindset and lifestyle uphold this relational attitude which is the divine attribute of God but let us remember that Godly attributes cannot come to humans through their efforts but is a gift given to people when they are enlightened and blessed through divine intervention of God’s grace and mercy.

The state of Sabbath and Shalom can only be maintained, when God is in control of humankind and the creatures of creation acknowledge and observe the will and purpose of the Creator. When this is so, Paradise, Eden, Sabbath and Shalom is attained but the present reality is not so and it indicates that something is wrong and we are called to explore the cause of the present predicament that is threatening the world and terrestrial existence.

To conclude I wish to remind us that the image of God in human beings enables us to lord over creation in a God-like manner as the ability to understand and be compassionate over all things is an attribute of God encompassed in the gift of God, that human beings be created in the image of God with the blessings and duties that follow after their creation.

According to this truth our ability to take care of the universe and all creation can only be displayed to its totality when we are in the image of God and the image of God can only surface in our lives when we are completely open and obedient to God.

### **Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *In the light of the new understanding of rereading the Bible what does it mean to you when the Bible elevates the equity the image of God in male and female? (Genesis 1:27).*
2. *How do you perceive others (people, other living things and environment around you)? Do you have a top-down attitude towards them or do you acknowledge their dignity and accept our equality in diversity?*



## Paradise, Sabbath and Shalom Shattered-Sin

**T**he present dilemma of climate change and global warming that is threatening terrestrial existence highlights the shattered state of the Sabbath, rest and the Shalom of God as human beings become self-centered as we are driven by the spirit of greed that links to the original sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

Sin according to its original meaning means that we have missed the mark or target as it was part of acclamations and comments usually heard around the sport of archery in the early Roman days. We have missed the mark or target of God's intent that we be in the divine image and to be in fellowship or communion with God.

Human beings were created to be human beings in God's universal order and in this we were to be in God's image and completely and entirely draw from God in order to display the right and proper nature of relating to God, the environment and to all other living things. This Godly nature was interrupted when our ancestors (Adam and Eve: Genesis 3: 1-4) were lured to disobey God by desiring to be God. This craving spirit infused into the human psyche by tempter gave birth to that self-centeredness that gave birth to selfishness and egocentric mindset that stayed humankind throughout history.

The craving to be God that we witness in Genesis 3, is "sin" for we have missed the mark and purpose of our creation to be 'Man' and the sad thing about this is the fact that in God's universal order there is only one God and all living things are assigned their respective roles and are expected to play these roles for the attainment of the Sabbath state of rest where all creation and creator are at rest (harmonious coordination and coexistence).

Man's missing the divine intent (sin) disrupted God's universal order and man lost his status and the earth was cursed and likewise all its inhabitants became distorted as the very being that was suppose to hold the link between creation and Creator (Man) has lost the ability to lord and have dominion over creation as intended by God (Genesis 1: 28).

Human kind's sin is driven by the self-centered desire to be God and this has been the nature of human beings ever since where we witness the spirit of greed dominating our lives as we exploit the world's resources for our own benefit. It is so deeply entrenched within our nature that all aspects of our lives is contaminated by it. This thought is rightfully defined by Saint Paul in Romans 3:23, where he states that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The sinful nature has contaminated our minds and dictates our lives, making us blind to the needs of other living things and our environment (neighbors). It is so deeply embedded in our lives that almost all known principles are tainted with this egocentric character as we interpret all interactions to benefit human beings whether personal, individual or communal, disregarding the environment and other living things in the process.

The sinful, arrogant and selfish lifestyle of humankind has continually broken the Sabbath and Shalom of God that all creatures living in the world are in a state of groaning (Romans 8:22) and likewise our environment, as human beings continue to exploit natural resources abusively and behave arrogantly against fellow human beings.

Sin has dictated all aspects of human life that in the depth of its chaos and darkness we have acquired the skill to live in it and accepted it to be the norm of our existence. Saint Paul defines it perfectly by saying that "we are

dead to sin” (Romans 6:1) thus committing sin has no significance for we are unable to feel whatever we have inflicted on other living things and environment. Such is the truth of the impact of sin that deceit and trickery, corruption and bigotry, cheating and cutthroat behavior are accepted as normal in daily interaction. The self-centered attitude driven by greed dominates all human interactions as the competitive spirit drives us to make the most in any dealings we engage in. It is ego-driven as our focus is centered completely on the ‘I’ (Me). Note how the Bible emphasized the shift from the ‘self’, ‘I’ to love of God and others; this is the step to restoration of the Sabbath when our focus shifts from self to others.

This shattered state of the Sabbath and Shalom of God in the world cannot be put right with human endeavor as the very essence of the Divine attribute of God that gives us the ability to interrelate with the world and God has been removed by God from man; this is the truth that lies behind the nakedness that humankind experienced in the fall and to re-dress this nakedness, human beings need a greater power to restore that spirit and ability.

It is also important that due to humankind’s sin the ground (earth) has been cursed where its productivity will only be possible through the sweat from our brows as thistles and thorns will be normal vegetation due to the curse, a complete change from the scene of the Eden of God which was the first home for humankind.

The broken state of the world by sin even has affected the diet order that God intended where animals and birds are to be herbivores (Genesis 1:29) thus the carnivores and omnivores nature of earthly diet is a later development due to sin. This new development gave birth to the predator/prey lifestyle and the rule of “the fittest of the fittest survive” becomes the norm and this grew among all animals and even affected human beings where we took willy-nilly of all things for our benefit regardless of the consequences.

The present predicament of global warming and climate change that is threatening terrestrial and aquatic existence is the result of this mindset and it ties really well with St Paul’s thoughts on the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Sin disconnects us from God and this disconnectedness is carried by human beings into all our engagements and relationships as we are solely focused on our self-interest where our quest is our own benefit regardless of the injury and violence we incur to the world (neighbor/environment).

### **Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *In the light of this new understanding of sin can you identify some societal behavioral pattern that is self-centered?*
2. *How can you relate sin to the present predicament of global warming and climate change?*
3. *“Sin has made us gods of our own destiny”; discuss this with friends.*

## Restoration of the Sabbath- Salvation Act of God

**T**he sinful state of humankind has contaminated our spirit and we have lost the ability to identify with God. The powerlessness of humankind due to this development has highlighted our nakedness and vulnerability. In our nakedness we attempt to clothe ourselves but nothing we do can measure up to the divine will God intended. Our absence from God due to the fall also disturbed God's peace for that important link (humankind) has been lost.

It is in this state of brokenness and lost that the restlessness of the human heart cannot find the peace of God and the true meaning and purpose of our existence. No matter what we do, we cannot attain the fullness of life as was intended by God that brings inner peace and contentment.

The turmoil of humankind is also a concern of God for our restlessness will continue to distort and disturb all creation and the divine order of things. We should understand that our plight is our own doing and we have no power to repair the damage that we have incurred on ourselves and the earth and its inhabitants. It is in this state of despair and hopelessness that the grace and mercy of divine intervention entered in to the realm of our existence.

This intervention comes to the world through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ who entered the world to enlighten creation of the Divine will and intent and any creature of creation that is able to respond to Christ in faith will also be able to experience the fullness of life that the Bible identifies as eternal life. This is the essence of that salvation which is taught in Christianity for it is the liberating power that dawns on a person when one opens their life completely to Christ where all aspects of one's life is laid with faith and trust to the guiding presence of God through Christ. This experience kindles in our heart a sense of peace and contentment that evokes and surfaces a deep love for the Lord that drives and motivates us to a life of complete obedience to God.

This personal experience with Christ liberates us from the enslaving mindset that limits and confines our understanding on ourselves and our interests as we are driven to a broader understanding where we begin to realize that we are part of God's greater and bigger universal salvation plan as we hold that unique connection between terrestrial existence and spiritual existence in the components of who we are in the dust (terrestrial) and the breath of God (spiritual) in the creation of Man (Genesis 2:7).

This saving act of Christ in his presence alone impacted and influenced people but this is taken to another level when he was crucified on the cross as atonement for the sin of humankind. The disobedience of humankind that began with Adam and Eve and in which the curse was brought upon all human beings also saw its repercussion on fauna and flora and the reconciliation act on the cross by Christ saw the reversal of this curse as he was nailed and wore that crown of thorns, taking the full brunt of humankind's penalty on his body to liberate humankind from the wrath and anger of God and reverse the curse. The reversal of the curse is symbolic to the crown of thorns on Christ's head as it highlights the reversal of God's curse of 'the grounds shall bring forth thorns and thistles' (Genesis 3:17-18) as the reconciling act made by Christ restores the former glory of the world.

This is the deeper level of Christ's liberating and saving act that awakens human life to a deeper bond with God thus reviving our being to the awareness and sensitivity that drives us to a life of commitment and obedience where the peace of God prevails in all our engagements and interactions. This new way of existence will uphold the reversal of the curse and therefore restore the former glory of the universe as divinely instituted from the creation.

As we all experience this new state of being in the power of Christ's saving power, we are drawn together in a manner where we begin to speak the same language and practice the same lifestyles where the love and mercy of God dictates our lives and the sensitivity on the needs of others becomes obvious to God's people as the spirit of Christ that is highlighted in his famous saying that there is no love greater than to lay one's life for others (John 15:13) becomes the nature and culture of our existence.

In this new state of liberation we are transformed to a level of awareness that compassionate concern becomes the norm of our existence thus enabling us to respond and correspond in a manner that is both enhancing and nurturing to all things around us.

This state of existence promotes coexistence wherein all living things coordinate in a manner conducive to one another in which the fullness of life is experienced by individuals and collective peace is attained as all things coordinate harmoniously in the great symphony of life. This harmonious coordination is the state of God's Sabbath and Shalom that is the norm of God's kingdom.

Again we are reminded that this state of existence can only come to us when we allow the saving power of Christ to fully control and transform us. Here again we are confronted with the basics of the Christian faith that focuses on believing in Jesus as the incarnate of God who has come to reveal to humankind the will and intent of God for the world and also the truth that he had paid the penalty of our sin on the cross thus restored the *Imago Dei* and our standing with God.

It is this new relationship with God that calls us to abide and heed to all that God wants of us thus our accountability to God in our role as God's steward in the world is something that we need to hold firm for we shall be judged in the way we dispense this calling in our engagement with the world.

***Here we are reminded once again of:***

Our ability to uphold our standing with God in this transformed state of existence will continue to manifest the Kingdom of God wherein Shalom (Peace) is experienced and Sabbath (God's rest) is enjoyed in all interactions and engagements.

This form of existence makes our living a process of continual worship and service to God.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *In the light of this new understanding of God's salvation, salvation is both personal and universal; discuss this thought.*
2. *As a saved person are you experiencing these things; a) God's Sabbath in the world, b) the Image Dei in your life, c) personal peace and joy?*





The harmonious coordination that promotes coexistence between all living things in a manner conducive to one another is the state of God's Sabbath and Shalom.

*Remember the world is home to all living things and all have equal rights to enjoy life to fullest*



## Life as Worship

**T**he closing words of Psalms 23 by King David in dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is the heart of this particular tract as it challenges us to remember that we are eternally in the presence of God. This thought does not take us away from our engagement with the world but brings us and the world into the presence of God.

Another Bible text worth contemplating is Psalm 139 which clearly identified that we cannot escape or hide from the presence of God; therefore in whatever we engage in, we are always in the presence of God.

In this observation we are called to understand that we are always in the presence of God and the universe is the house of the Lord and our actions in and to the world should be appropriate to that which is done in the house of the Lord. Any action otherwise is sacrilege and profanity.

According to this line of thought we are encouraged to realize that our whole existence is to be worthy of God therefore all things done in life should be seen in the light of it being done in the presence of God. It is also in this thinking that we are called to deal with the environment and creation in the manner that is right and proper with God.

Interestingly when we expand this thought it will bring us to see life as worship, in the light of having reverence and respect whilst engaging with the world, creation and environment. This understanding will keep us in check as we relate with the world and the present enslaving consumerist and the throwaway societal mentality with its cutthroat practices needs to be reviewed and relinquished.

The spirit of communion and relationship with God is natural with humankind for we were created to be such and according to this angle of thought, corporate worship is an epoch of communion between God and man but in saying that life is continuous worship is to imply that “mass” or “worship service” is expanded to cover all aspects of daily living (life).

The new understanding of life as worship will encourage human beings to be vigilant of how we live life. By this it means that our stewardship roles and our accountability to God in managing resources is all part of worshiping God thus we will at all times be mindful that all our actions and interactions be right and proper as worthy to be done in the presence of God.

In this understanding of life as worship, we are challenged to review our knowledge on the practices and traditions of Christian worship and allow ourselves to shift our emphasis from personal spiritual enhancement to a spiritual awakening that is encompassing and holistic. Christian worship has been identified with spiritual formation and many times it has been seen as means for personal and individual spiritual formation. In this new approach we are encouraged to venture beyond our personal faith with God and seek the relationship between God and creation and the people of faith's role in maintaining the equilibrium where we all (Creator and Creation) experience and enjoy life abundant or the fullness of life (John 10:10).

Life as worship calls all people of faith to live their life according to what God intended and willed, and according to our stewardship role as willed by God we are called to subdue (control) and have dominion (control) over creation. This control over creation is to be displayed by the people of faith whilst they are in the image of God and likewise in the presence of God. So our interaction and engagement with the world (creation) is the worship that we are attempting to define here.

In Genesis 2:15 God calls Adam to dress and keep the Garden of Eden and here the duty of God's people is highlighted where we are to be responsible for the earth and dress it as in reforestation. I believe that this is fair ground to drive all people of faith to engage in activities that upholds conservation and the present sustainable awareness mindset that is ongoing is the way forward and topping it up with the thought that it is our act of maintaining our perpetual relationship and fellowship with God as a form of worshipping God.

Life as worship opens and calls all God-fearing people to revisit their understanding of worship and note the relevance of what we are doing in our gatherings in churches and actual living in the world. In this, we question and critique human relationship and our connectedness with God when we consider the universe as God's temple and all interactions and engagements with the world are to be worthy, right and appropriate to God.

In this line of thought we are reminded to relook at the ways we treat other living things and critique our treatment of overfishing, deforestation, waste management and increasing carbon footprints. Seeing all these in the light of life as worshipping God definitely will challenge us to rethink the practices that we are engaging in daily.

This new understanding of life as worship will continue to challenge us to critique our lifestyles (thoughts, word and deeds) whether it is worthy of God. This attitude will definitely transform our lives as we attempt to be worthy of being in the presence of God and the wonderful truth of this quest is the benefits it will bring to other living things as we learn to master our God-given roles of stewardship of creation. In living life as worship our God-consciousness is elevated in to great heights and our vigilance on the violation and desecration of other living things and environment becomes significant as we acknowledge and recognize our collective link as worshippers of the same God who is our Creator.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *Are you aware that we are ever-present in God's presence (Psalms 139)?*
2. *Can you identify some aspects of your life that contradicts this new understanding of worship?*
3. *If life is worship, what is the church services we attend? (Discuss)*

## The Embracing Inclusive Theological Understanding that upholds Equality and Dignity of all things

**T**his tract is an attempt to further our understanding in the heights attained when the “Imago Dei” (Image of God) is restored in human beings through the saving works of Christ’s sacrificial death. The removal of our sins by the saving acts of Christ elevates human beings in to a new form of existences in terms to our relationship with God and this also impacts our lives profoundly that perceptions and attitudes are transformed. The Christian term normally used in this new experience is that we have become “alive” and a “new life” has dawned on an individual or the common term of “being saved” .

This new life experience brings with it an awareness and sensitivity that enables a person to recognize many things that has often been taken for granted. The awe that befalls us is due to our acknowledgement of the Divine presence in the formation of all things and our discoveries of the complexities and uniqueness of creation and our role in the cohesion of universal existence.

As our faith develops, our spirituality becomes stronger, our understanding broadens and likewise our awareness and sensitivity of all things becomes clearer. This sensitivity begins to recognize the importance of the relational character of all things and the linkage of all things and the truth of how they complement each other.

This awareness is the result of a spiritual development and maturity as those who attain this mentality begin to shift their focus from themselves to acknowledging the significance of others and appreciate the fact of the interdependence of all living things under the rule of God the creator.

This mentality begins to establish in the human heart a deep compassionate spirit that acknowledges and appreciates all living things as equal and significant and therefore relate to all things in a decent, respectable and upright manner as we recognize our accountability and responsibility to God in the utilization of the God-given resource that are available around us.

The Embracing Inclusive Theological mindset grows from an understanding of personal salvation and transformation by God on individuals for a greater purpose i.e. we are saved to instill the will of God on all living things so all can experience and enjoy the fullness of life thus manifests the Kingdom of God.

This mindset will shift our understanding and focus from self to others (neighbor and environment) and the bigger picture of God’s salvation will become the determining factor of all our interaction in life thus a sense of understanding and recognition of the significance of all things will dawn in our minds.

As we begin to embrace this new theological understanding our lives begins to open up to appreciate the truth of the interconnectedness of terrestrial and aquatic existence and the importance of allowing the space for all living things to grow, recuperate and replicate as they reciprocate one another in the ecosystem chain of life.

The Embracing Inclusive Theology breaks down difference barriers and encourages us to identify the commonality that benefits all and this comes only to people who have transcended the self-centered mentality due to the grace and mercy of God that has liberated and transformed their lives to a new level of understanding.

The shift of focus from self to others is a divine characteristic and was fully displayed in the incarnate of God, Jesus Christ. After close observation, one will surely realize that Christ’s principles is deeply focused on others, we hardly see his engagements and interactions as aimed for self-interest, all he was involved in was to benefit those whom he engaged with and God.



This finding will open our eyes to realize that this inclusive theological norm comes only to those who have a spiritual awakening and connection to Jesus Christ because it is the spirit of Christ that enables us to perceive the world in this new light of compassionate concern for others.

This new understanding elevates life to the comfort and peace of God and the competitive spirit that seems to be the norm in all human interactions is removed as the new understanding of equity begins to settle in our hearts thus respect, admiration and reverence of God and Creation becomes our way of life.

When this spirit dawns on people it also opens a new understanding where the inclusive and embracing spirit in our heart welcomes and accepts all things in a new perspective as we open ourselves to understand whoever we engage with, in the spirit of God. This is a new height in faith and spirituality because we are elevated from our self-centered existence to a broader dimension of existence as God opens our eyes to realize our role in the bigger picture of God's universal plan.

When this new mindset settles in our psyche we are also able to transcend beyond the traditional, religious and cultural stereotype that has created unjust structures and systems of prejudice and discrimination.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *Are you safe and comfortable when with those who are different from you?*
2. *"Being inclusive and embracing is a new height in spirituality"; Discuss.*
3. *How can we embrace the shift from self-centeredness to concern and care for others?*

## The Church; The Body of Christ: The Kingdom of God

I wish to elaborate on this topic by challenging the Christian Church being the body of Christ is called to manifest the Kingdom of God in the world (Matthew 5:12). This calling challenges the church to rise above the confining understanding of existence in isolation where we are engrossed in personal and individual spirituality and fail to realize that we are part of God's universal divine plan.

This tract is focused on all Christian churches and we are encouraged to recognize our bond which is Christ our Lord and the ever present power of the Holy Spirit that guides us to do God's will in the world. As much as we feel and embrace our respective theological emphasis we are challenged in this new approach to seek the commonality of the urgent need to address the global predicament that is threatening terrestrial and aquatic existence.

There has been some response and thoughts from churches saying that God will take care of whatever mess we are in, as much as this is true from a faith based point of view, it is also important that we realize that God has gifted us with the ability and capacity to read the signs and do our part in the sustainment of all that God has blessed us with.

This is a hard ask because it confronts the church to shift away from over-emphasis of self centered spiritualism. This mindset often encourages the evasion of the realities of our predicament as we build glass castles so to speak, amid the chaos that threatens terrestrial existence.

The Church being the body of Christ is fully aware and sensitive as Christ was to creation and the environment being the gift of God which was given to human beings to take care of. The salvation work on the cross by Christ reconciles the world to God and in this the "Image of God in Man" is restored and with it the characteristic and spirit of stewardship that was first inculcated in Creation as part of human obligation within God's universal divine plan.

The Church or the Body of Christ basically in the light of this understanding is a congregation of people who have been reconciled to God and have been reinstated to the former glory of being in the image of God and therefore have been revived to the glorious state wherein they are able to lord and have dominion over creation and environment in the spirit of stewardship as we are fully aware of our responsibility and assignment that was instituted by God who is the owner of the universe (Psalms 24:1).

A question I presume that will probably be popping up at this juncture is; what are the roles of other religious faith in this scenario?

I believe that we need to explore the teachings of other faiths in their understanding of environmental stewardship and personal accountability to God and there is no better avenue to draw from than the Assisi Declaration on Nature that was formulated by five major religious organizations namely; Christians, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism . All these faith based organization agree that God created the universe and human stewardship is a divinely instituted responsibility and human beings are obligated to accept it as divine calling, failure to do so is "sin" for we have missed the divine intent of God.

Such is the truth of the tenets of the major faiths of the world that the challenge to live accordingly is obvious and evident. It is in that light that I believe we can work and walk hand in hand displaying our stewardship ability in observing sustainable practices in life.

Friends we are reminded once again that as we anticipate the peace and joy of the Kingdom of God, may we be reminded of the discourse where Jesus states that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15); it is near and imminent because the interaction of personal faith in Christ establishes the peace of the Kingdom within the lives of those who turn to Christ and furthermore this faith re-creates, moulds and shapes lives to respond positively to God's calling on stewardship of the world.

To conclude this track I wish to raise an aspect of the analogy of the body of Christ where we are reminded that as in a body, different parts play different roles yet they coordinate harmoniously to the entirety of the body as it responds, engages and interacts with life. This truth surfaces the fact that we as people of God need to recognize and acknowledge our strengths and weakness and how we connect to each other in order to make the world "click and tick" according to God's divine plan.

With that may we continue to remember the words of the English poet, John Donne, who penned these words in 1624; "no man is an island, no man stands alone," for we need each other may we continue to embrace this mindset for the change we need and expect can only come when we all participate in bringing the change.

So let us all work together to bring that change for the better.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *Are we able to identify with others as body of Christ?*
2. *What are the common bonds that identify the connectivity of all living things?*
3. *How can your church be part of ecumenism and interfaith that promotes this unity?*

## The Dignity of all Creation

**I**n re-reading the Bible we have come to realize and recognize the significance of all living things as divinely willed and purposed by God and their role in universal biodiversity. This understanding is very important to be advocated by human beings as we are the cause of the havoc that is threatening global existence.

Powerful statements by the Christian Church have been circulated and it calls all people to deeply critique waywardness towards creation and environment. I wish to quote some thought provoking statements by Church world leaders which speaks to the tune of the theme of this tract.

### **The Catholic Church on Care for Creation**

“Perhaps reluctantly we come to acknowledge that there are also scars which mark the surface of our earth: erosion, deforestation, the squandering of the world’s mineral and ocean resources in order to fuel an insatiable consumption. Some of you come from island nations whose very existence is threatened by rising water level, others from nations suffering the effects of devastating droughts. God’s wondrous creation is sometimes experienced as almost hostile to its stewards, even something dangerous. How can what is “good” appear so threatening” *Pope Benedict XVI, World Youth Day, 2008.*

“Take good care of creation St Francis wanted that. People occasionally forgive, but nature never does. If we don’t care of the environment, there is no way of getting around it” *Pope Francis.*

“The ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity which embraces time and space.... a greater sense of intergenerational solidarity is urgently needed. Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources” *Pope Benedict XVI, World Peace Day Message, 2010.*

### **The Wesleyan (Methodist) statement of Faith in regard to Creation Care**

The Wesleyan Church believes it is time for Christians to take the lead in ensuring that the beauty and majesty of God’s creation are sustained. We believe these efforts will help ensure the protection and health of future generations, will be a blessing to people all around the world (especially the poor), will improve our witness to a watching world and most of all will express our love and worship for our Creator, Redeemer and Friend.

Wesleyans are encouraged to work vigorously for the protection and care of God’s creation in ways that honor the dignity and welfare of human beings. We suggest the following steps:

- To take intentional measures to reduce the harm we personally do to the environment.
- Encourage our local churches to adopt policies and practices that minimize environmental damage and reflect good environmental stewardship.
- Include environmental stewardship as a topic for teaching and discussions in our churches, so that Wesleyans (Methodists) might be equipped to take action appropriate to our context.
- Advocate for reasonable public and governmental policies which will protect and preserve the environment.
- Lovingly communicate that all of these efforts are motivated by our love for our Creator and our desire to steward what He has entrusted to our care.



These powerful statements open us to the realization that it is a must that we acknowledge the dignity of all living things and treat them in a manner that is worthy of God the Creator, and in due course uphold our stewardship roles as designated and instituted by God.

The highlight of this discussion is the dispersion of our stewardship role within the perimeters of sustainability and conservation which fully eradicate and remove exploitative and abusive mindset and lifestyles that disregard degradation, damages and violation of environment and living things.

The 'I' and 'Thou' (*Ich und Du*) by Martin Buber is an important tool of relationship that we need to embrace in order to observe the dignity of all living things and environment for in this understanding our (I) observance of any subject is with respect as the emphasis of the 'Thou' recognizes the respected status of the object of our focus.

Recognizing the dignity of all living things both terrestrial and aquatic is a new height in spiritual and faith development for it is a new discovery as we begin to move away from the self-centered spirituality that recognizes self-centered spiritual benefits to a spirituality that acknowledges a universal and global spirituality that benefits all living things and environment to the glory of God.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *In addressing the dignity of all creation can we see how we can relate with other living things in an 'I-Thou' relationship?*
2. *Do you believe in the interconnectedness of all living things?*

## Global Practical Eco Theology; the way to Go

**A**fter all that has been shared in these tracts where we are encouraged to re-read the Bible and identify it in a broader and encompassing manner the call for action is unmistakable and this is where we will focus on in this is tract.

The imminence of the threat to our existence by the catastrophic predicament which we have brought upon ourselves due to our excessive carbon footprint and abusive and exploitative lifestyle gives us no choice. The survival instinct is a natural response when life is threatened but we are encouraged when the root causes of these threats are known because we will be able to equip ourselves better to tackle these threats. Since we are able to identify the weaknesses that have brought about our predicament we are urged to work on mending the mess we have made.

Carbon footprint from greenhouse gas fuel emission is the number one contributor to global warming and to mitigate the impact of carbon footprint all people should engage in projects and programs that will address the reduction of greenhouse gases emission by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and switch to renewable energy source. The Methodist Church in Fiji, in order to address this has formulated national programs on Carbon Footprint audit where all vehicle owners are requested not to use their vehicles a day in every quarter annually. This will mean four days in every year we will leave vehicles idle in order to reduce fuel emission.

Deforestation and forest degradation are the second leading cause of global warming and more so a great displacing factor to environment and its habitat. This fact calls us to act now and afforestation and reforestation (planting of trees) is a must for all communities. This can be made in partnership with REDD+ (Reduction Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) a program that is geared to combat forest degradation. This program is to be incorporated in faith based organization policies where members are encouraged to engage in practical theology as our responsibility and accountability to the world and God is exercised.

As we are aware that afforestation and reforestation program will restore specie habitation both flora and fauna and also help the process of reducing of greenhouse gases due to photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is the process where plants use sunlight to produce glucose from carbon dioxide and water for their sustenance and subsequently emit oxygen in the process.

This fact has made the church (MCIF) formulate a national tree-planting program where all Methodists' are expected to plant 4 trees annually (1 per Quarter). How that is done will be seen within the Methodist Church structure and system.

### **Marine Conservation**

We in the Pacific have neglected our stewardship on marine resource probably due to the misguided thought that the vastness of our ocean equates the resources therein. We only need to explore and study available data and studies on marine life and fish depletion to be aware of the vulnerable state of our marine resources. This fact challenges Christian and for that matter all God-conscious people (all faith base organization) who know their responsibility and accountability to God to be vigilant and monitor our engagement with marine resources and see that overfishing is removed from all levels of fisheries. Sustainable practices should be observed at all times.

Noteworthy is our observance of the "Tabu" fishing grounds and the conservation of endangered marine species. The MCIF have a Memorandum of Understanding with WWF in the observance of the "Tabu" during the Kawakawa (Grouper) spawning period which is an initiative hoped to ultimately sink down on peoples psyche to observe the recuperation of species. People of faith, because of their high calling, are expected to be





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aware of the equilibrium and balance in humankind's coexistence and observe all avenues that can bring this into reality. The Bible teaches of the Jewish Sabbatical which is a period that allows environment to fallow for the mere fact of natural recuperation.

The call on marine conservation is highlighted by the fact that we (human beings) were created to take care of all living things and environment and this encompasses flora, fauna and aqua (Genesis 1:26-28). Other Bible verses that identifies with the seas and all that is in it that belongs to God are; Genesis 1:20-22, Psalm 24, Psalm 95. All these verses remind us that we as people in the image of God are called to rule and control these as stewards who accountable to God.

### **Waste management**

Waste management is also an issue that we need to address and we are therefore called to see that waste is properly disposed off in the best manner. This calls all people to be responsible in waste disposal and this principle should dictate waste disposal; all waste disposal is not to violate another living things right of space and life. We are encouraged in this exercise to monitor our throwaway attitude and learn to control our lifestyle in a manner where we practice the art of living within our means therefore minimizing excess that becomes waste. While all these issues are aimed at National level, I wish to close off by reminding us that all these acts for the better begins with individuals and that is you and I. So as we speak of being practical Christians and responsible people we are speaking of individuals (you and I) to kick start this lifestyle by doing what you have to do for the betterment of all.

The Bible verse identified with waste management in the sanitation laws covers the care of human waste (Deutonomy 23:9-14) and this can be the platform where all waste that deters and hinders health can be our point of departure in addressing the global waste issue.

Friends, the reality around us calls us to clean up our act, do not wait for the church announcements, do not wait for government gazettes to inform you on what you need to do, let common sense prevail and pick that rubbish in front of you, your little act with those of your friends around you is a beginning to the change we expect. Your little act is indeed a ripple but if we all act together these little ripples will become the wave that will cleanse the world for the better.

### **Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *As Methodists what are the ways in which we can help with planting of trees individually and as a community?*
2. *How can we individually and communally act out the conservation and better management of our marine resources?*
3. *How can we individually and communally address waste management in our homes and villages?*



## Transformation attained from the Inclusive Theological Paradigm

**T**his tract wishes to address the liberation and transformation achieved when the re-reading of the Bible exercise is deeply embraced. With the new inclusive mindset gained, we begin to understand we do not exist in isolation from the rest of the world as we share life with other living things in God's universe where we are destined to experience and enjoy the fullness of life according to the Divine intent.

The inclusive theological understanding mentioned herein opens our lives to recognize and acknowledge the dignity of others; namely other living things (terrestrial and aquatic) and the environment.

Interestingly this embracing and inclusive spirit opens us to a deeper understanding where many of the social, religious, traditional and cultural norms are critiqued to create a level ground of existence where each can enjoy the fullness of life which in due course sustains universal equilibrium.

### The Gender Issue

The gender issue has been a thorn in the chest for society as many of our social structures has been gender based and many resorted on scriptures to uphold this perception. The re-reading of the Bible to a new inclusive understanding bases its argument in Genesis 1:26 where the Bible states that God created man (human beings) in God's image and strongly came forth with the words; ***"And God said "And now we will make human beings, they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds and all the animals, domestic and wild, large and small". So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female, blessed them and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds and the wild animals" Genesis 1:26-28.***

These two verses highlight a lot and let us dissect them to help us in our observation.

Human beings according to these verses are created in the image of God (resemble) and knowing that God is spirit (John 4:24) we conclude that the image of God is spiritual and is both present in male and female and embracing this understanding we also come to accept the equality between male and female. So in the light of this understanding we are challenged to acknowledge and accept the equality of male and female as divinely designated and therefore has to be treated as such in all human interactions.

A thought worth processing as we discuss this topic is the fact that many principles and philosophy that dictates human existence is designed by males and the question of status quo can be an influencing power to how things have become. If this is the case of why things are as they are then we need to critique the male dominant mentality that seems to be the present norm and culture.

Accepting this new understanding of inclusivity where male and female are equal, we will be elevated to a new level of existence where our relationship is dignified as we acknowledge our equal standing in the presence of God. An issue of concern that is very disturbing is the issue of domestic and gender violence and Fijians are not spared as we are known to have 61% of our women who face this problem. The solution to this problem lies in the fact that when we grasp the essence of this new inclusive theological understanding, respect and dignity of all, becomes the norm and culture of our life. The argument behind this teaching is the fact that when a person is liberated by Christ, his whole being is enlightened thus his understanding of all things is clear and his

relationship with all things will be in a righteous and Godly manner. This truth will manifest in the recognition of the equality in the gender issue thus respect and dignity will determine how we relate to one another.

The enlightenment attained in this new understanding of faith and spirituality will also curb the sexual harassment and crimes that is becoming a social plague in our communities.

So in re-reading the Bible within this new understanding we are equating the liberation, salvation and transformation of individuals to this unique enlightenment where we are able to acknowledge and recognize people as they are and respect them as they are. The judgmental cap that usually dictates how we see things is removed as we accept others as equal and relate to them in the same manner.

Once this is achieved, other issues such as ethnicity, disabilities, sexual orientation, etc becomes less significant as we accept people as people and work towards achieving a platform of co-existence where all can enjoy life as divinely willed by God.

**Personal and Group Discussion points:**

1. *In the light of this new understanding, how do you feel after processing these observations; are you disturbed? Why?*
2. *How do you equate knowing God, faith, spirituality and your salvation if you still have reservations on issues such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality?*

The Sustainable Seafood Project is a partnership between WWF and the New Zealand Aid Programme working with Le Cordon Bleu to secure the wellbeing of coastal communities in Fiji through sustainable fishing.

*Layout and Design: Kalo Williams*

