Building a New Aesthetic for the Black Church Funeral:
“Hello Black Church, I Am the Green Funeral”
by
Sequola Collins

Date: ___3/14/2022_____
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Dr. William Willimon, D. Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The care of creation is the responsibility of all Christians. Consequently, the Black Church has a role to play and must attend to its responsibilities seriously. In this thesis, I take a comprehensive look into rituals of the Black Church related to death—funerals, memorials, and burial practices—and how the church can take ownership and be more responsible in the care of creation. For instance, the Black Church could benefit from a new aesthetic of beauty related to funeral processing. Currently, the Black Church funeral concept of aesthetics is tightly coupled with visuals and preservation of the corpse—shiny gold coffins and embalming. As a chaplain, director of bereavement, and minister of the Gospel, I focus on the Black Church’s relative silence and insufficient attention given to how our practices around death go against the foundational principle of covenant relationship and therefore distort our perceptions of Christian beauty. This thesis engages aesthetics and ecological commitments that lead to introducing practices of ministry that honor God and contribute to the care and sustainability of the earth.
Dedication

To Destiny Diamond McNeill,

Once again, I write a dissertation dedicated to you. But how does this dedication stand in consideration of the previous? Well, you remain the gift that at the very thought of you encourages me to be the best I can be. I am proud of you and all your accomplishments. In my eyes, you have already reached “the big stage” because you have a loving heart that is rooted in God’s love. You are a bright light that cannot be hid under a bushel. Although your grandmother Ethell is not here in body, today, I recognize and feel her warm encouraging spirit. I am eternally grateful to God for keeping us thus far and I trust God to take us all the way. I love you, Destiny. Mom
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Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to the Black Church for which I am a product. I thank Rev. Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley for his mentorship and continued dedication to the Black Church and the Church, at large. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Sarah Musser for her advice and guidance from conception, in our Old Testament class, to completion. May God continue to richly bless you and your family. To all my academic professors, particularly Dr. Ellen Davis, thank you for your impartation of Scripture, love, and life.
Chapter 1. Introduction

At death, Americans frequently want to distance themselves from the natural process of decomposition. With little thought of what is going in the soil, we often pollute the land and therefore hurt or harm the very thing that God loves and gives to us for our flourishing. The land supports and feeds us, and we are called to be in a covenantal relationship with it: yet so often we are not. For example, we bury our dead in chemicals, unnecessarily embalming the bodies of our loved ones, and we place them in manufactured products, caskets also chemically treated. Certainly, we must consider the laws and legislation governing funeral practices. But might there be a larger story that is missed when we approach death and our relationship to the land? Despite the well-known Scripture, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” Genesis 3:19, Christians often fail to embrace the fullness of natural burials as we return to the land.

I seek to make my case by leaning heavily on Leviticus to identify covenantal relationships, and through obedience, help strengthen Black Church covenantal loyalty. Leviticus 26:40-46 says, “then I will remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.” I iterate the blessings for creation—land and people with rain, harvests, and fertility. With obedience to God’s statues and laws, Leviticus 26 says “I will give you peace throughout the land, so that you will lie down with none to make you tremble” (Leviticus 26:6; Everett Fox’s translation). I use Leviticus 26:19-20 to suggest what disobedience would resemble and how might the Black Church sow its seed in vain. I translate disobedience into such practices as burying money in fancy coffins, injecting dead bodies with toxic chemicals, and emitting harmful pollutants into the air with cremations. All these poisonous burial practices make “earth
like copper” and infertile lands. But Leviticus teaches not to defile but to be clean and holy “for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2).

I offer two lenses through which to examine the Black Church’s care of creation: covenantal relationship and beauty. Through these, I wish to see how covenantal commitments and aesthetic concerns hold up when they are placed into conversation with creation theology, environmentalism, and the current practices of the funeral industry, and how these values end up distorted by harmful church practices that do not honor creation. I hope to help the Black Church see differently, especially as concern for covenantal relationships and recognizing and celebrating the beauty of the world are already important to the church. As we return to dust, Black Church congregants can be educated and directed toward funeral options that uplift the foundational principle of covenantal relationship that has the potential to guide us toward caring ecological practices. As committed Christian leaders, we must become more aware of how we attend to our dead and return them to the ground in the most life-giving of ways.

In essence, my research investigates the incorporation of green burial practices into the Black Church funeral. My goal is to explore how changing aesthetics among funeral practices in the Black Church might enable more faithful stewardship of God’s creation in order to provide a blueprint for churches’ bereavement practices that better witness to our commitment to our covenant with God in terms of how we use the gifts of creation God has so graciously given. Although I come to this project as a Black Church member and with my own experience, my approach is informed by and weighs heavily on historical work and current literature. I will build upon that work and enter conversation with theologians and those in the funeral industry and the green burial fields to help make the claim and in support of this thesis, my presentation to the Black Church.
In these efforts, I enter into a conversation with Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll for Black environmentalism; with Bishop Ambrose of Milan for the true nature of beauty; with Ellen Davis, Wille Jennings, and Norman Wirzba for a doctrine of creation, land, and ecological faith; with Betty Holley and James Cone for Black Church perspectives; with Candi Cann and Karla Holloway for the African American funeral experience; and with Lee Webster and Suzanne Kelly for the green perspective in support of a Black Church funeral rethink toward a new aesthetic rooted in earth (land), covenant, and God.
Chapter 2. The Setting

2.1 An Opening Narrative

As a chaplain within a healthcare system, I have been called to the bedside of those who are reported to be actively dying. Generally, actively dying signifies the final stage of death where the patient is expected to die within a matter of hours or days, usually three days. When this determination has been made, the hospital pastoral care staff exhibits a high level of preparedness for death—enhanced communications, ensuring backup coverage is intact, and that all technological systems are working and engaged. Likewise, as a minister of the Gospel within a Black Church, when death is imminent, the church leadership goes on high alert where internal communications are made and an abundance of prayers for the sick and for the family ensue.

With death waiting in the wings, preparations need to be made. Upon receiving a notice of death or a request for funeral services to be held, the church usually schedules a meeting with the family to discuss the Order of Service, who will participate, and costs (if any). Only with extreme cases, such as an expectation of a very large crowd, have I witnessed the church be proactive with the scheduling of a formal staff meeting before a funeral. Unfortunately, few post-funeral evaluating meetings seem to get held. All too often a funeral is pieced together inside of an existing Order of Service and, for the most part, the preparation is reactive rather than proactive by nature. For the grieving family, most have not pre-planned or prepared, so while grieving they are forced to participate in discussions and make difficult decisions. Additionally, in a reactionary state, there is rarely room for extended discussions regarding lessons-learned from funerals past, let alone extending the conversation toward considering environmental factors and other concerns.
In 2016, my church received news of the death of one of our members. Before the woman died, she spoke often to her children about having obtained life insurance, a burial plot, and being buried in all white—white clothing and a white casket. Every first Sunday, the mother had sat with the other missionaries of the church all dressed in white. So, to be buried in white was an acknowledgment of the life that she lived—trusting in the Lord and working for the church. Because she was a member of a local church, the family respected and held the mother’s church membership as sacred. Therefore, the family knew that this church is where the funeral services would be held. In addition, the family remembered their mother’s wishes, taking the wishes into initial conversations with the funeral home directors (morticians); then again, into a separate meeting with the church. Because of some pre-planning discussions (however small) and because of the way the mother lived a life that reflected both her Christian and cultural values, the family had a sense of peace because they were carrying out the mother’s wishes. Thus, the family felt at ease, especially as the morticians were members of the same local church as the family (the mortician sang alongside the mother in the senior choir), and the funeral home was just down the street from the church, part of the community that the deceased had lived in and been cherished by.

However, although the deceased had given some thought about certain aspects of her funeral, there were gaps in her planning. When the family went to the funeral home, the funeral home attendant acknowledged their deceased mother had been picked up and was now in their care and was being prepared. Not wanting to know the specifics, the family did not ask questions of the meaning of “being prepared,” but because of tradition and culture, it was known that “being prepared” meant the mother was being embalmed—being preserved and being made
ready for presentation.\(^1\) Understandably, these details, at that time, were too much for the family to consider in any depth. As the meeting began, the mortician presented the price list of services, which were itemized with no discussion regarding options. Since the family felt a closeness with the funeral home, they were willing to pay the listed price without entering negotiations. For example, when it came to selecting a casket, the family was moved to the casket room for selection, and for convenience and streamlining of services, the family decided to go with what the funeral home offered without deviation and not to create more stress. A family member did note that Costco was selling caskets, and the attendant confirmed that this was an option, but this was not pursued. In the end, the casket was purchased based on color, aesthetics—shiny, brass handles, and custom wording/stitching—and price. No formal pre-planning with the funeral home had been done, so the family was there making decisions under the duress of the hour. The cremation option was never placed on the table; maybe because the mortician felt that she knew the family very well. For this family, the mortician was correct. They did not want to consider cremation.\(^2\)

Next, the conversation turned to vaults—a vault, a liner, or whether a vault was needed or not. The family chose the vault that would keep water from seeping in. Fortunately, the mother had purchased burial plots many years before with the family in mind. Other family

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\(^1\) The family trusted the funeral home and director to do “whatever they do” behind the closed doors in a professional manner with all industry ethics. The funeral industry’s usage of formaldehyde—the primary ingredient in embalming solution, is a human carcinogen and once absorbed, is toxic to the soil—is widely known; and (in some arenas, such as this research) is contested. So, preparation was mentioned without mentioning any dangers with the preparation. Author and mortician Caitlin Doughty claims that American funeral industry operates on a human exceptionalism model that is based upon “protection, sanitation, and beautification of the corpse.” Ultimately, this family is expecting the mortician to work within the current standard traditional model. Caitlin Doughty, “A burial practice that nourishes the planet” TEDMED November 2016 Accessed December 17, 2020. https://www.ted.com/talks/caitlin_doughty_a_burial_practice_that_nourishes_the_planet

\(^2\) However, according to Mark Freeman, baby-boomers are preferring a simpler, less expensive funeral, and therefore we have seen cremations rise. Adam Freeman, “Baby Boomers Transform Funerals” Wall Street Journal, 18 Dec 2002, “https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/398875096?accountid=10598
members were already laid to rest there. Toward the end of the meeting, the mortician “threw-in” an extra funeral car at no charge. The price for the embalming and casket remained at list price.

At the second (final) visit to the funeral home, the deceased was ready for family viewing. Standing at the casket, the mortician removed the light delicate covering from the mother’s face and continued to fix every small detail. As previously stated, this well-known mortician was a friend of the mother. No doubt, this brought comfort to the family. The mother was freshly preserved and dressed in all white, as was the casket. The inner casket was lined with engraved material which read: “May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.” Although difficult, these things brought the family comfort as they did what needed to be done, the way they knew it should be according to traditions in their culture and church. “Your mother looks good,” the mortician said. “Yes, she does,” the family responded. Then the mortician expressed that “it was not hard to make your mother look lovely; your mother has always been a beautiful woman.”

The church, the funeral home, and the family all worked together to agree on a date and time and to ensure the funeral was conducted without a hitch. For years, the “viewing” or "wake" of the deceased—where the community is invited to see (to view) the deceased body and to share in the grief—was done the evening before the funeral. However, by the new millennium, many viewings were being conducted on the same day of the funeral. This helped to spare the family repeated trips and avoided aggravated pain and anguish. This family chose the viewing, funeral, and burial to occur all on the same day. Inside of a set viewing hour, the mother lay in state with an open casket. An hour later, the casket was closed, and the mother was funeralized.

After the church service, all attendees drove to the cemetery. The cemetery processional was routed on a busy highway. The grave diggers—appointed by the city or the cemetery staff—
were there awaiting the arrival of the family. The vault was already in place down in the grave. If you could balance yourself well, you could look over into the grave and get a glimpse of the vault. Upon arrival, the pallbearers placed the casket above the grave and the services began. The family followed directions of the church leaders and morticians. Upon the benediction, the family was directed to leave the cemetery while the casket was still above ground. Once all the funeral cars left the cemetery, the graveyard workers completed the burial process. The family was instructed to come back later, the next day, to view a covered grave.

### 2.2 A North Carolina Black Church Funeral Model

The relationship between North Carolina Black Churches and the North Carolina Black funeral industry is complex. In *The Glad Funeral*, I expound on how the Black Church helps the grieving family *carry the load of the casket*. To *carry the load of the casket* goes beyond walking the grief-stricken family through stages of grief but through funeral processing. But what else might *carrying the load of the casket* imply? To what extent can funeral practices breach the covenantal relationship with God, if at all?

African American funeral homes in North Carolina, like other African American funeral homes, grew out of the ugliness of segregation to become mainstays of Black community and culture. In North Carolina, Black-owned and operated funeral homes, in association with Funeral Directors and Morticians Associations (FDMA) of North Carolina, promote excellence in service to the grieving families of North Carolina. From central NC—Perry-Brown, Hargett,

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Johnson and Sons; to the sandhills—Paye, Wiseman, Colvin, Dafford; to the mountains—Murrough, Wilkins-Hart, Morris; and to the coast—Peoples, Haywood, Shaw (just to name a few), all have sustained legacies rich in history and tradition. Notably, the prominent funeral home Scarborough and Hargett of Durham is a Black funeral home business in North Carolina with a long history. In 1871, grocer Joseph Crooms Hargett started a funeral home business in Kinston, North Carolina. In 1888, John Clarence Scarborough, Sr. joined the business and in 1906 became the first African American in North Carolina to be a licensed funeral director.6 In a 2015 article, fourth generation mortician John Clarence Scarborough, III tells the story of his great-grandfather joining the funeral business with Hargett to create dignity in death after a predominant Black figure in Kinston died and “the white mortician held his viewing in the basement instead of the chapel and used a wagon instead of a horse-drawn hearse.”7

With this commitment shown towards the Black community, yet with minimal options or variations in the larger capitalization of North Carolina’s funeral industry, I noticed patterns of funeral processing. Similar to some African funeral traditions,8 a North Carolina Black Church funeral is a communal event where, in the past, a wreath would be placed on the porch and neighbors would know death was present. Then the community cooks would bring food to the bereaved family. To the Black Church, funerals are like family reunions where people you have

“The National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association (NFDMA) was initially established because the National Funeral Directors’ Association (NFDA)—a largely white funeral home association—did not welcome Black funeral home members” (Cann, “Black Deaths,” 390).
6 Scarborough and Hargett, History and Staff, accessed June 8, 2021
https://www.scarboroughhargettcelebration.com/who-we-are/history-and-staff
8 Funerals, even amid the AIDS pandemic, are communal events and described as parades (displays). Most notably, “Moments after the hearse jolts to a stop, a church choir begins belting out songs and mourners stream out from two double-decker buses nearby—3,000 people in all. Big hats, miniskirts, platform shoes and cellphones are all on view. Corinna Schuler, "AIDS Crisis a Boom for Funeral Industry: Despite Poverty, it is African Custom to Throw Fancy Funerals.” Toronto Edition Headline, National Post, Dec 22, 2001.
not seen in years come to pay respect, reconcile old wounds, and reflect on all the years that have
gone by.9 Whether death is expected or comes quickly, when death comes, no family wants to be
perceived as ill-prepared. This time is not only for grieving but a time for the family of the
deceased to act as if they have everything together and not pieced-together at the last minute.
Ultimately, during their final acts for the deceased, the family wants the world to know that their
loved-one was loved. The Black Church helps the funeral come together beautifully, but
invariably it moves on to the next family without discerning how to help the families to see
better alternatives, to include ecological friendly options that might better honor God and thus
their loved ones?

With such loyalty towards the Black community and with minimal options or variations
in North Carolina’s funeral industry, I noticed patterns of funeral processing across the state.
Like Scarborough, I have noticed that “Black funeral practices tend to be more old-fashioned,
where for instance, viewings have remained in favor.”10 A public viewing of an embalmed body
is a staple of a traditional funeral. Mortician and author Caitlin Doughty says that not only does

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9 Like C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence H. Mamiya, other scholars, and much of the general public, I use ‘Black Church’
as a kind of “sociological and theological shorthand reference to the pluralism of Black Christian churches in the
this dissertation, the terminology of “Black Church” refers to an African-American collective institution, where
“Black church” refers to “congregations” or a particular congregation. Although complex, the Black Church,
whether capitalized or not, is one created out of a desire to obtain religious freedom. A human community with
public and private interests, birth from a African traditional religious consciousness, American evangelicalism and
chattel slavery, that was and is necessitated by racism in the church and broader culture for survival and liberation,
and that affirms the full humanity of all people despite the white supremacist and anti-black racism that asserts the
inherent superiority of white people and inherent inferiority of Black and all other non-white people, the Black
Church seeks to encourage and guide its members into a Godly life of salvation, holiness, and covenantal
relationship.

10 McElroy, “The Mortician who kept a neighborhood’s history alive.”
the traditional funeral include “the public viewing of an embalmed body but a casket is communicative of social status, and a large stone marking one’s grave”\textsuperscript{11} is also normative.

In addition, there exists a tightly-coupled partnership with the Black Church and the local Black-owned funeral homes. This bond is so tightly woven that it is difficult to tell them apart, mainly because many funeral homes employees also serve in some clergy functions or ecclesial roles in Black churches.\textsuperscript{12} Karla Holloways says that because “many Black funeral homes were themselves owned and operated by preachers [this] indicated the degree of intimacy the institutions shared.”\textsuperscript{13} This intimacy created a juxtaposition of Black people being proud of Black-owned businesses and seeing our folk not only survive but also thrive in business, while at the same time, presenting an opportunity to be reluctant to challenge or push back on the practices of the local funeral homes that have been known, or widely rumored around town, to practice toxic, or at minimum, westernized capitalistic behaviors that damage the psyche of the Black community. From the extreme practice after the Civil War of “we’d just mix our own embalming chemicals—formaldehyde, alcohol, glycerin, borax, and water”\textsuperscript{14}— to what today can be considered, at best, as simply wasteful practice of putting money in the ground, might there be ways in which the funeral industry practices are not aligned with strong Christian values that are rooted in a covenant relationship with God concerning care for creation? In North Carolina, the relationship between the Black Church and the Black funeral industry remains tightly coupled.


\textsuperscript{12} Ecclesia (Hebrew: ekklesia) meaning a called-out assembly; the elected; often translated as the church. (Matthew 16:18). The church is used to govern, rule, and give expression to the Spirit of God.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 19.
2.2.1 A North Carolina Funeral Industry Model

The North Carolina Black Church funeral finds itself functioning in ways that align with other profit-making businesses in America. This can be seen by examining the North Carolina Funeral Directors Association (NCFDA) four categories of service that comprise funeral costs. They include:

(a) Funeral Director Services—a staff’s professional services, facilities and equipment usage, and merchandise purchases: casket, vault, clothing;
(b) Disposition Services—earth interment, the opening and closing of the grave, and cremation costs. The cost of the urn is separate.
(c) Memorialization Options—for example, a monument or grave marker.
(d) Miscellaneous Expenses—flowers, honorarium for the clergyman, newspaper notices, additional vehicles or out-of-town transportation of the body and other items, many of which involve the discretion of the family.

The North Carolina Funeral Directors Association reports average funeral costs of $6,000 to $9,500. Table 1 below shows a possible break-down:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise (casket and interment receptacle)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaries</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities and Equipment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash advances for convenience of client</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and General</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16 The North Carolina Funeral Directors Association (NCFDA), “Today’s Funeral Costs,” accessed June 8, 2021 ncfda.org/todays-funeral-costs. However not required for funeralization, it is worth noting that embalming, a major cost to the consumer, is not listed anywhere on the Today’s Funeral Cost page.
17 Although noted as “could be of different kinds,” only two disposition types are listed. Burials and cremations are the traditional two.
Virginia Beard and William Burger in *Change and Innovation in the Funeral Industry* describe early American death rituals as simple—“funerals were not lengthy events, the body was handled by the family with no embalming, and with simple caskets.”¹⁹ But this simplicity changed over time with the Industrial Revolution and “the increase economic affluence to display wealth.”²⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century, displays of wealth and classism were in full view—the type of hearse, the number of volleys fired to honor the deceased, the number of death rings given to the mourners to remember the occasion, locations of internment, the make of the headstone, and now the length of the funeral, some “lasting 3 to 4 days.”²¹ In North Carolina, such displays were also found.

### 2.2.2 Putting Money in The Ground

Holloway notes that there is an element of *display* in the Black funeral. For example, not only is the body of the deceased on display but wealth (or the pretense of wealth) is on display: the number of funeral cars, the color and finish of the casket—satin bronze or gold plated. Holloway recalls historical mortician practices often included “the *swindling* mortician using a cheap coffin with a lot of paint.”²² This contributes to the perception that “the negro will do a lot to be sure of a classy funeral.”²³ In a move to suggest an elite status, Black Republicans of the mid-1900s began turning from the Black-owned funeral homes to white funeral homes.

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²¹ Ibid., 48.
²² Ibid., 32.
²³ Ibid., 32.
However, outside of pauper or welfare burials, the favor has not been returned and replication of such action has not gained wide-spread traction.

Yet to some, not skimping on funerary displays is advantageous. La Trese Evette Adkins, in her dissertation, “And Who Has the Body,” explores the historical significance of African American funeral display. Adkins concludes that she "cherishes our refusal to skimp on funeral" and that not skimping is a “cosmological investment in ancestors by pouring our hearts and pooling our resources into funerals.”24 Such a desire to honor the dead is understandable, and to critique the celebration of our loved ones and the good intentions of the Black Church, the Black funeral industry, and the Black community at large that have experienced such oppression is not my intention here. We need to celebrate the lives of our friends and family—it is how we do so that is a concern.

2.3 With Noble Intentions

I recognize the noble intentions of families seeking to honor their loved ones and the reasons for the Black Church’s funeral practices. With noble intentions “the ritual formality and spectacle of Black funeral and burials were [are] clearly deliberate attempt to make the home-going ceremonies of African Americans underscore or encourage a view of each life as important”25 and of value. This is especially true when we live in an America that has repeatedly shown that the commitments, choices, thoughts, feelings, memories, and hopes of the Black and Brown people are of little or no value. The failed oppressive capitalistic system in which America was founded aids in the systematic injustices of our bodies and communities, yielding emotional weights that are difficult to overcome, says activist Prentis Hemphill. Hemphill

25 McElroy, “The Mortician who kept a neighborhood’s history alive.”
surmises that our current systems continue to traumatize Black people and "ensure we have little time and energy to heal"\textsuperscript{26} and few resources at hand. Thus, the Black funeral is seen as an opportunity to show reverence, respect, honor, and dignity, even while the services that create the funeral are subject to the same capitalist imperatives that are frequently oppressive.

The morticians attempt their best to beautify the deceased given the circumstances. Embalming is not only a vocation, but an art—the art of prolonging the semblance of life—says a North Carolina mortician and long-time embalmer. During a period of his own family bereavement due to the death of a cousin, he shares, “I cannot make her beautiful because I am so accustomed to seeing her alive”\textsuperscript{27}—as if to say that his best effort to hold death at bay is not good enough. I attended that funeral, and the deceased looked very pleasant, peaceful, and as the old folks would say, “she looked good,” “she looked like herself,” and/or “she looks like she is asleep.”

The Black funeral often gives space for one to be fully human, emotional, and dramatic. It is a space where we are loved individually and collectively, even if it comes at a cost. Unapologetically, the Black Church funeral is filled with expression—our hurt and pain with the singing and the praises unto God with the voice of triumph, “Hallelujah Anyhow!” Holloway cites a family who expressed that if we must send Momma home “we are going to do it in style.”\textsuperscript{28} While others may say that this style represents drama and theatrics, these acts signify that “you mattered to us” and is a way to honor in death what was not always shown in life.

\textsuperscript{26} Prentis Hemphill https://prentishemphill.com/ Accessed November 14, 2021
\textsuperscript{27} With no ill intent, this mortician has thoughts of “making beautiful” and/or what constitutes beauty
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 180.
“African Americans have always used death material culture to resist; using last rites as a tool to subvert the racist, stereotypes caricature of thug and brute,”

Dr. Kami Fletcher tweets. However, such spending of a large amount of money on funeral and burial expenses can be problematic from a Christian point of view. In general, if we can afford an expensive casket for our deceased loved one, then that is what we seek to provide. In some Black communities and urban subcultures, thick heavy weighted gold chains and gold teeth are expressions or symbols of riches and having one’s head above water.

Because of the long systematic oppression and not wanting to be seen as not being able to afford a nice casket, it may be difficult to get Blacks to not put their money in the ground (in a casket that many can view as a no-return investment) because of the stereotypical perceptions. But to show your money, your bling-bling or riches, has become a trend on music videos that belittle the concept of quiet achievement. Such approach to aesthetics with surface-level thinking and the display of capitalism keeps the practice of deeper thinking, sustainable practices, and long-term investment far from reach. However, display of wealth is not the equivalent of beauty, yet the consideration of beauty—from both a Christian and an ecological point of view—must be at work regarding what is placed in or returned to the ground. We must consider the impact on the environment and creation and how all this relates to our discipleship, faithfulness, holiness, and commitment to God.

North Carolina Black Church funerals are filled with cultural significance and hold the power to bring people together—to re-member and to unify. For the Black Church, the funeral

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29 Dr. Kami Fletcher, Tweet on June 4, 2020, https://twitter.com/kamifletcher36/status/1268580673515851776?s=12&fbclid=IwAR39WW6NS7L_sR5FPLLT1XYP75JJE1SU0FZsRR6ev3le70E1M840TCFPBrU

Example of colloquialism or slang might resemble: “having some bling-bling” (meaning I have something that is eye-catchy; something of beauty/worth/value) or “I got my duckies (dollars) in a row.”
allows for space to honor God; and for the community, it creates an opportunity to honor Black life in an American context that has historically enslaved, oppressed, and ignored the value of Black life. In this space and place where Black people are devalued, Black Church funerals—with the funeral home and the church working together—are acts of agency, healing, remembering, and resistance that push against the suppression of part of American culture.

2.4 Challenges for the Black Church Funeral: Ecological Effects of Contemporary Funeral Practices

Black Church funeral practices may have an African flare yet have adopted Westernized ways of behavior that are, for example, expensive and not ecologically sensitive. The Westernized funeral industry is not one that nourishes the planet but one that promotes human exceptionalism. Its model rests on the protection, sanitation, and beautification of the corpse, promoting the protection of the corpse from the ground by mounting barrier levels made of concrete, metals, and hardwoods. Alexandra Harker in *Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial*, reports the following:

Contemporary funeral practices and cemeteries are ecologically problematic. Digging in a modern cemetery in the United States is much like digging through a toxic waste site. Every year in the United States, the chemicals and materials buried along with bodies in a conventional burial include approximately 30 million board feet of hardwoods, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, 104,272 tons of steel, and 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete (Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, 2011). Exposure to formaldehyde affects funeral workers’ health, demonstrated by a high incidence of leukemia and brain and colon cancer among embalmers (Holness, 1989). The pollutants are not limited to the area revealed elevated concentrations of metals used in casket construction, including copper, lead, zinc, and iron (Spongberg and Becks, 2000).

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2.4.1 Unclean and Polluted—The Funeral Industry Models: Roles, Rituals, and Routines

For the Black community, the experience is no different. Historically, for many, how you *lay your loved one away* says a lot about you. Did you prepare for death? Was there an insurance policy? Where is the funeral? What casket can be afforded? And what is on display? At the time of death, no one wants to appear ill-prepared but instead *having their stuff together*, especially when it comes to the cost of the funeral. Consequently, the Black funeral home and the Black Church must accept the fact that they have bought into the commercialization of death and dying. In what ways have the Black Church and the Black funeral home industry become hazardous material handlers— or at minimal enablers— of the carriers of hazardous materials?

2.4.1.1 The Embalming Process: Invoking Toxicity

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has a funeral rule which states that there is no state law that requires embalming for every death.32 Yet, Candi Cann shares that “funeral homes typically consider embalming the cornerstone of the funeral package, as embalming the deceased body generally means that visitation will be held.”33 According to the Green Burial Council (GBC) *embalming* is “the process of removing blood and fluids from the dead body and inserting preservatives, surfactants, solvents, and coloration to slow decomposition and improve looks for a period of up to two weeks. Organs are punctured and drained of fluid with the use of a sharp instrument called a trocar; waste is disposed of in a standard septic system or municipal wastewater treatment plant.”34 Embalming is not for long-term preservation of the body but temporarily preserves the body using chemical injections and topical applications to maintain a

life-like appearance and provides the family time to complete funeral preparations, make travel plans, and complete a viewing and other rituals or funeral obligations.  

Although formaldehyde is the most preferred method of embalming, “The World Health Organization, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, classify formaldehyde as a hazardous waste being a human carcinogen.”

Victoria J. Haneman, in “Tax Incentives for Green Burial,” tells us that:

Embalming fluid is a solution used to temporarily preserve a corpse after death. Embalmers inject at least 3 gallons (11.3 liters) of the fluid into the cadaver's arterial system and body cavity to slow decay for wakes, funerals and other traditions that precede a burial. Embalming fluids often contain a combination of formaldehyde, chemicals like methanol and ethanol, and water. Formaldehyde can comprise up to 50 percent of a typical embalming fluid [source: Martin]. Outside the funeral home, formaldehyde is used in medical labs as a tissue preservative and in pesticides and fertilizers. It's also a flammable, strong-smelling gas that's released from a variety of sources—cigarettes, exhaust pipes and building materials among them—and a known carcinogen.

Today, ecologically friendly embalming options—with less-toxic chemicals and plant-based oils, refrigeration, and direct cremation without viewing with immediate burial—are within reach. Although more ecologically friendly embalming solutions have been marketed, formaldehyde, even though highly toxic, is the preferred method because of the sustained practices still underway by the Black funeral industry.

2.4.1.2 Soil and Water Contamination

Soil and water contamination is of concern for environmentalists. Although most prevalent in older cemeteries, soil and water contamination for funeral practices are disturbing.

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On one hand, The Pan American Health Organization says there is “little evidence of microbiological contamination of groundwater from burials.” Yet, on the other hand, in a handful of cases adjacent to historical cemeteries, tests show elevated levels of contamination. It is “highly likely that the problems were caused by leachate from casket, vault, or embalming fluid or other incidental materials,”38 Lee Webster suggests. Thus, there are soils that are not totally clean or unpolluted. But to what extent does the funeral industry, as co-creators of the earth, have in the management of the body and responsibility in the wellness of the soil?

2.4.1.3 Caskets and The Economics Continued

“African American people believe in funerals,”39 says LaTrese Adkins. But the pressing question is: “how are we going to pay for it?” At death, many Black families struggle to answer this question. Often the ecclesial leader helps to guide the family not only through the funeral process but through tough questions regarding pricing. Because of long-standing communal relationships and church membership, often the church makes accommodations or adjustments to their offerings to meet the needs of the family. As stated earlier, Black funeral processing is considered old-fashioned. This brings to light the lack of variation in death options that is being offered to Black families.

Caskets (or coffins) are big business for funeral homes, says a local North Carolina Black-owned funeral home mortician/director. Ranging between $2,000 - $10,000, caskets have been the center of the business model for decades. Mark Harris tells of upsells and the sale of bells and whistles such as golden casket handles that often are sold as scrap metal. It is difficult for old school funeral directors/morticians to make a shift in longstanding business models.

38 Webster, Changing Landscapes, 248.
39 Adkins, And Who Has the Body?
Investing in a crematory for this well-known funeral director was initially a tough sell for him and his father, the business founder. The thought was that the shift would kill business. The father believed that if the public were aware of the less expensive route in funeral processing, then the public would seek a way to reduce costs, and this would cut into the profits of the funeral home. However, the son has found that with the demand in cremations over the past decade, their business has not suffered loss but is able to welcome the cremation market and not turn those seeking cremation away to other local businesses. Cremation took a while to catch on in the Black community. But now that it has, cremation has become a common consideration inside of funeral options.  

There remain other opportunities inside of the Black funeral industry for environmentally friendly practices. The national funeral industry has projected domestic annual revenues of $68 billion (by 2023) and, interestingly, the industry has slowly started to go-green. A survey conducted by the National Funeral Directors Association found that 53.8% of respondents were interested in green burial options. Although death will come to every living organism on the planet, the green disposal of one’s corpse remains a topic rarely discussed. This is where the Black funeral industry can be of service to its community and to the world.

According to the National Funeral Director Association (NFDA) 2019 General Price List Study, funeral costs are not rising as fast as rate of inflation, but funerals are hardly inexpensive, as Table 2 below shows.

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40 The projected cremation rate for 2020 is 56.0% (up 8.1% from 2015), shows the NFDA 2020 Cremation and Burial Report. National Funeral Directors Association. Brookfield, WI.  
Table 2. National Median Cost of an Adult Funeral with Viewing and Burial: 2019 vs. 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nondeclinable basic services fee</td>
<td>$2,195</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal/transfer of remains to funeral home</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>$310</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embalming</td>
<td>$750</td>
<td>$695</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other preparation of the body</td>
<td>$255</td>
<td>$250</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of facilities/staff for viewing</td>
<td>$425</td>
<td>$420</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of facilities/staff for funeral ceremony</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>$495</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearse</td>
<td>$340</td>
<td>$318</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service car/van</td>
<td>$150</td>
<td>$143</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed materials (basic memorial package)</td>
<td>$175</td>
<td>$155</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal burial casket</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
<td>$2,395</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Cost of a Funeral with Viewing and Burial</td>
<td>$7,640</td>
<td>$7,181</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vault</td>
<td>$1,495</td>
<td>$1,327</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total with vault</td>
<td>$9,135</td>
<td>$8,508</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But even a little increase can impact those in poverty. During the Great Depression people were “paying for funerals with livestock—pigs, chickens, and sometimes even artwork.” Let us reclaim our funerals by paying attention to death ahead of time, creating a plan that works best for our unique family, and owning a sense of agency.

2.4.1.4 Traditional Cremation

More popular in the white community, the trend towards cremation has been slow for members of the Black Church. Yet, by 2035, the rate of cremation in all 50 states will exceed 50 percent, said National Funeral Directors Association. According to Mark Freeman, baby-

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boomers are preferring a simpler, less expensive funerals, and therefore we have seen cremations rise.

Between 1996 and 2000, cremations rose by five percentage points to 26% of the about 2.4 million deaths annually in the U.S., according to the Cremation Association of America, which sees no sign of the trend abating. By 2010, cremations are expected to account for 39% of American funerals, according to the association's data, and by 2025, the number should rise to about 48%. The average funeral with a casket and burial vault costs about $5,300, giving the funeral home a profit of about $750. A cremation, including the urn, costs about $2,600, with the funeral home making a profit of about $600. A cremation with no service or urn costs about $1,000.45

The up-trend in cremations is in line with a local white-owned funeral home in Raleigh, North Carolina that reports 80% of their business is cremation. They acknowledge that having a crematory was once thought of as a negative and would decrease business and income. However, it soon discovered that many want cremation, and for this Raleigh business having a crematory enhances their business options. As stated previously, cremation took a while to catch on in Black communities. But now that it has, cremation has become a common consideration inside of funeral options. Yet, what about land, creation and the responsibility of the church?

In many ways, African Americans are genuinely concerned with the land and their relationship with it. Separated and uprooted from their homelands, African Americans struggle to discern a sense of place and develop an attachment to land and earth. However, this concern with the land is often presented as having a historical or cultural nature, rather than an ecological, or better yet, a theological one.

Black ecclesial leaders can do better in the preparation of congregants and can shape how the community might think about their final resting places, informing members how to be better stewards of creation as we prepare to return to the ground. However, one can argue for the

45 Freeman, “Baby Boomers Transform Funerals.”
importance of having a more thorough and effective educational outreach for ecclesial leaders around ecological theology to address the silence. If, for example, someone does not know what is wrong, how can they be criticized for their action or the lack thereof? Given the oppression of Black Americans, it seems understandable that attention to theological ecology may not be a pressing issue just as it is not, so far, for most of the church. Notably, some Black ecclesial leaders seem to be silent on topics such as the link between theology, the earth, and our return to it—choosing to focus mainly on the soul and not the body or the whole of creation. The ecclesial leader would do well to keep the whole in mind. Yet, silence by the church leaders varies from being ill-informed to negligent. In the 1990s, the African American ministerial association partnered with a white owned multinational funeral home chain to appoint preachers as “grief counselors,” but this partnership was largely driven by interest in profit through the sale of grave materials. While Holloway may not be able to provide itemized documentation about her conclusion, still, she concludes that “Not surprisingly, the local pastors, their state and national denominational affiliates profited from the kickbacks of each sale.”46 While some leaders are silent in order to profit from environmentally harmful funeral practices, others fail to consider the importance of our created bodies within a larger context. Could removing the silence possibly expose shamefulness of past sins where we have failed to act? Could we be unsure how to manage or to hold the tension together towards better? Moreover, overcoming silence moves the Black Church to pay attention to wellness and well-being of all creation, which in turn, invites making healthier choices, less manufactured processed ways of being, and solicits the building of new aesthetics. While identifying misplaced beauty might be seen as low hanging

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46 Holloway, Passed On, 44.
fruit, by naming this misplaced aesthetic, the Black Church will be guided, even the more, toward wellness and wholeness found in truth and what really matters to God.

By embracing traditional funeral practices and cremations, the Church has not exemplified good stewardship when it comes to the end of life. Now, however, the Black Church has the opportunity to extend the care of self toward the care of earth.

2.4.2 Cultural Perceptions and Societal Pressures: Bells and Whistles, Style, and Class

Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination* argues that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nature, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”47 As the Black Church attempts to extend the care of self toward the care of earth, cultural perceptions appear to be challenging and accountability problematic. Challenges might include the social injustices of race and place, as well as accessibility and accountability. Regarding accountability, there is a closeness and an intimacy that exists between the Black Church and the Black funeral industry. Both pastors and morticians encounter people at pivotal and even vulnerable times, providing complementary services. Used properly, this relationship creates an opportunity for the church leader to inform the funeral industry and move them toward ecological justice.

Regrettably, Black churches have often watched silently and participated in the toxicity of funerals and funeral processions. On many levels, we make referrals and hand-offs but leave creation-care for all unaccounted for. I contend that this is a mistake. If hand-offs (partnerships) are being made, then the Black church is obligated to hold some responsibility and accountability. If ecclesial leaders allocate attention to the practices of the funeral home,

especially as it relates to pollution and toxic practices, not only will this raise awareness in the community, but the environment will benefit from a collective communal effort instead of a single effort.

In *The Glad Funeral*, I recognize that there is “a slothfulness in addressing new funeral trends, with the need to balance the desire to be current, yet also to be respectful of tradition.”\(^{48}\) Society can respect the notion not to move too quickly regarding cultural and traditional norms. However, the silence about harmful practices on the part of clergy has been allowed to continue under the pretense of not knowing or fully understanding the damage that is being done. There may be some truth to ignorance as the details of industry practices might not be widely known by non-specialists.

In *The Glad Funeral*, I say that “theoretically, all funerals may be remarkably similar and uniform in appearance, yet behind the scenes, the local church exerts great effort to provide services for the family, at times with only days or a week’s notice. While there are variations in funeral practices, there is a mindset that makes all the difference in a funeral being executed to witness God’s Kingdom.”\(^{49}\) The mindset of the church official and/or the funeral director carries a great deal of weight, authority, and leadership to a family in search of direction. I say that “the church, along with the funeral home, will work to deliver services that best meet the needs of the family.” And that “Church officials can embody Christ’s Kingdom.” But how often are these services best for (Christ’s) creation?

Culture and traditions come with societal pressures even at death. Corinna Schuler in “AIDS Crisis a Boom for Funeral Industry” allows us to peak into the poverty and the booming business of funerals in Africa. In the face of poverty, fancy funerals with *a festive swing* include

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\(^{49}\) Ibid., 50.
big hats, miniskirts, platform shoes and cellphones—all on display. Schuler states that “African funerals are always a community affair where people come uninvited; although some just want the food.” The funeral homes provide eight wheeled luxury vehicles (super-stretched limousines) with beverage bar. From African to African American culture, Black funeral homes have standards to uphold. Historically, whether good or bad, these standards are passed on to the family; because at the time of such a public event, there is no family that does not wish to be seen in the best light, even in the face of poverty.

Before we get inside of the Black Church’s funeral doors, profound expectations exist—no touching the preserved beautified body; the body must be enclosed in a casket; at the cemetery, the casket must be enclosed in a vault. Why aren’t these expectations and the consequences that follow from these practices discussed and acted upon?

Black churches aid in the separation (lack of closeness) to what is known or perceived to impact the environment. Non-biodegradable coffins, embalming, and the investment of thousands of dollars in funerals offers the perception that being natural inside of a funeral is not popular, is not classy, and is not beautiful.

In general, when a family comes to or calls the church regarding a [pending] death, they are informed about the church funeral processes. Then, if asked, the church will direct the family to a funeral home(s) to address other business that will occur outside of the church building. At times, the lines between church business and funeral home business maybe blurred. However, this thesis argues for the ecclesial leader engaging early in the process and investing in the

50 Schuler, "AIDS Crisis a Boom for Funeral Industry."
51 It is widely known that the deceased body has been embalmed by an embalmer—a living breathing person that has encountered deadly chemicals. Yet, the Black Church remains silent. “Embalmers are at an 8+ times higher risk of contracting leukemia (Journal of the National Cancer Institute, 11.24.09) and a 3 times higher risk of ALS (Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry, 7.13.15)” Lee Webster, Changing Landscapes, 2020, 100. Kindle Location 2115 of 5693.
52 I speak of this church process more extensively in my book, The Glad Funeral.
education of the church and community on funeral practices that may harm us and the environment.

### 2.5 African American Environmentalism: A Crisis of Culture and an Argument of Home—Ownership, Responsibility and Accountability

In America, a case can be made that African Americans embody the essence of environmentalism. Our ancestors and “slaves lived closer to the ground and often understood southern crops and environment better than their masters. … Nature uncultivated provided both highway and sanctuary for slaves,” proclaims Mart A. Stewart in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*. Yet Norman Wirzba states that “when we talk about something like an environmental crisis, we need to understand that what we are really dealing with is a crisis of culture, a failure to be properly at home, and a distortion of what it means to be embodied beings living (necessarily and beneficially).” The environmental crisis is not foreign but is as close to us as our culture allows; and that the perceived proximity or

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55 (What does our “westernized” culture allow?) For example, in many cases, slaves were not in control of their own burial practices. “By the late 1700s, African influences in burial practices are considered to have ‘faded out’ or at least have been fading; since the nineteenth century, most African American burials tended to be in line with European-American and Christian practice (and both were based on traditional European burial practices, such as head to the west, feet to the east). African Americans most often had little control over their own burials during slavery times, and in Chapel Hill burials were likely to have been “controlled” in one way or another by the University and/or Chapel Hill VIP’s or society, especially when buried in one of the local public cemeteries such as what is now known as the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery. Certain African American burial practices (with regards to material culture) used in other Southern cemeteries, both urban and rural, do not seem to have been utilized in Chapel Hill or Carrboro, or at least weren’t allowed by the municipal authorities to remain and were removed. At best they were extremely limited, as no instances besides “homemade” headstones have been documented in, for instance, the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery. Instances have been documented, however, in rural Orange County cemeteries utilized by people of color, particularly African Americans” (Steve J. Rankin, “A Segregated Part of Heaven: The History of the West Chapel Hill Cemetery,” May 2011, https://cemeterycensus.com/nc/orng/075/075-wchcem-report.pdf).
closeness of the crisis is a factor in human behavior, our acts, or responses to it. How might “crisis of culture” be intersected with the way the Black community advocates for the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment (Black environmentalism)? Is the case for “failure to be properly at home,” however plausible, being made by the very empowered population and capitalistic culture that strips one from home and from roots? This toxicity (crisis of culture), in and of itself, is a priority for many in the Black community and needs continued focus where justice is applied. Westernized culture, which contains systemic oppression, now leads environmental crisis efforts. Yet many refuse to take ownership of past and current toxic behavior towards other humans and miss opportunities to better manage or bridge past wrong-doings toward the direction of ecological justice to include justice for all—a cause that for the Church is covenantally right and holy. In this complex arena of environmentalism, since it has been said that the relationship between the Black Church and environmental issues is one of complexity, might the ideology of “home” be a critical factor and barrier in the psychology of the Black community?

I was struck by the reference to being “properly at home” by Wirzba because of the displacement from home of Black and Brown bodies. Where is home for them? Is home where you were born? Is home wherever your parents are? Is it the street, the building, or covering of wherever you lay your head? For the Christian, home is ultimately with God—where God abides. Yet, with urban renewal and now gentrification disrupting the Black community, where does the Black Church find itself? To what degree does this paradoxical relationship of home

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56 As a previous member of the Green Burial Council and a continued supporter and advocate of a green community and greening the Church, it is widely known that white people in the United States with power and expanded resources have made substantial movement in this area where the Black community still follows. The question is often raised “how best to incorporate or bring people of color to the table?”

57 Environmentalism Definition. Merriam-Webster defines environmentalism as “advocacy of the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment.”
and land hold true for the Black community and its church? What can be done now to bring justice and peace to the earth? As resident aliens, the Black Church is to embody and be a representative of what we want the world to be regardless of the current land that is occupied.

In my dissertation, *Telerobotic Operator Risk-Taking Behavior* (2009), I studied the effects of remote operators who managed the site of hazardous material. I concluded that the (tele) operators, stewards of skilled mastery, who were at a distance from the material they were handling and thus having a greater protection level, exhibited greater risk-taking behavior regarding the hazardous situation than those who operated locally and on site. In other words, the operator’s decision-making proved to be riskier in an emergency when the threat did not appear to be proximate. Thus, my research showed that there is a correlation between distance (whether perceived or actual) and behavior, which affects outcomes and consequences. Might this theory of distance be applied to the barriers—the synthetic coffins and other non-biodegradable materials—used by the Black Church and its community, as well as the funeral industry as an indication of a lack of closeness (whether perceived or actual) to the environment, creation, and God? Are the funeral practices of Black Churches complicit to the environmental problems of traditional funeral practices in the United States? Might my risk-taking behavioral theory regarding distance be applied to the distance or lack of closeness the Black community (and the Black Church) may feel in relation to the environment (home); and therefore, projecting more risky behavior towards it?

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59 Ibid. My background and prior research studies as an engineer involved the effects of remote operators who managed the handling of hazardous material. I concluded that the operators (stewards of skilled mastery) being at a distance and having a greater protection level, exhibited greater risk-taking behavior regarding the hazardous situation than those who operated locally and on site. In other words, the operator’s decision-making proved to be riskier (lackadaisical or undisciplined) in any emergency, when the threat did not appear to be proximate. Thus, my research concluded that there is a correlation between distance (whether perceived or actual) and behavior, which
But now, for the sake of our environment and for the sake of covenant, the Black Church must strike a balance between past and future; be bold in the recognition that the earth and the environment does not belong to the white community, who “for five-hundred years have acted as if they owned the world’s resources,” and have held the beautiful resources (i.e., the trees) against us, against its neighbor. But for the Black Church, to make the greater psychological shift and argument for our earth conservation is not up for debate. Although, an argument can be made that the culture of the African American church and its community have been negatively impacted by the majority, Western capitalistic society, we all are responsible for the environment’s care, and no one can leave it up to one group to act as good stewards. The Black Church did not create the environmental crisis nor is it our fault, but it is our fight.

2.6 Climate Change: It Is Not Our Fault But It Is Our Fight

“Climate change is now a very familiar phrase but many of us are just beginning to understand its impact,” according to the National Council of Churches USA: Eco Justice Programs. They argue that “African American churches have historically accepted the responsibility to address problems that have a negative impact on our communities.” Yet affects outcomes and consequences. Might this distance theory investigation be applied beyond the telerobotic environment in which it was founded? Although distance might not be a slam dunk or a smoking gun relating to home, however, I do think the idea of hazardous materials, hazardous material handling, and risk-taking behavior will come into play in a subsequent chapter involving Black churches, the Black funeral industry, and the impact of toxicity from embalming bodies. This idea may resonate with criticisms from Wendell Berry about our economy: because we are removed from where resources are extracted or food is produced, we are more likely to abuse it and less likely to love it because it is “foreign” to us. Wendell Berry, “The Idea of a Local Economy,” Orion Magazine Accessed January 1, 2022 https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-idea-of-a-local-economy/

62 Ibid.
James Cone asserts that “the leadership of the African America churches turned its much-needed attention toward ecological issues in the early 1990s.”63 Did not the community follow? If not, why? Dr. Betty Holley, executive committee member of Creation Justice Ministries, and Associate Professor of Ecological Theology at Payne Theological Seminary—the oldest free-standing African American seminary in the United States—makes the claim that the Black Church has an opportunity to reclaim the goodness of the land.64 Holley, a champion for ecological justice suggests that attentiveness to the global climate is an invitation to pursue ecological conversion—a deep theological transformation and “of being” in relation to our environment.

James Cone argues that ecology touches every sphere of human existence, and that Black liberation theology includes the fight for justice for life in all forms.65 Yet this does not imply that the poor have no agency in the present global crisis, Michael Northcott in A Moral Climate suggests.66 For example, considering creation and the earth as we return to it and changing the way in which one is buried does respect the notion that one’s last act on earth should not be to harm the earth. A commitment to being environmentally friendly requires that the scope of all human activity be integrated into the biosphere in a way that is sustainable.

Yet, how central is environmental justice to the Black Church? Because of the perception the climate does not present an acute situation, the Black community will more than likely find itself acting in a reactionary way once environmental harms hit home. Studies have found that

63 James Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” 117. However, Cone’s position is likely not affirmed by many other scholars. Because the 90s was a time of market growth, neoliberal politics, and some form of the prosperity gospel, it might be difficult to conceive that Black church leaders were focused on the environment and embodying ecological faith in this decade.


65 James Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” in Earth & Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet (New York: Continuum, 2007), 120.

Blacks were less informed, less aware, and concerned with environmental issues than whites.\textsuperscript{67} Often the Black Church and Black communities are living in a reactive world instead of being proactive based on what is known. To a degree, reluctance due to mistrust is understandable because those who lead in the effort to eradicate global warming are identified with the same ones in power who led such efforts as urban renewal and gentrification.

But will the Black community embrace greening in death? It would be helpful for the Black Church to make a public confession and release a statement of change regarding its stance and efforts to be faithful stewards of God’s resources in caring for the planet. Holley thinks that the Black Church and its community should be held accountable for our actions and practices. Holley notes:

\begin{quote}
Our economic woes, social unease, and environmental depletion are being shaken to the core due to our misplaced purposes and values of the whole of God’s creation. Our relationship with wealth and possession has become corrupt and idolatrous. We have been seeking happiness through things rather than through relationships. Too often we, in the church, have mimicked the values of wider society.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

With this statement, Holley urges the church to take responsibility for its actions and practices toward a better environment, toward a healthy creation.

The Black Church cannot be blamed for the environmental crisis—although it has, like almost all peoples, contributed to it—but it is our responsibility. Given the crisis we are facing, this may “cause one to repent from our habits and practices of undisciplined management. This call to repentance is particularly urgent now that we have knowledge about the fragility of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{67} Ostheimer and Ritt, 1976; Crenson, 1971: 15, LaHart. 1978; Giles. 1957: 488-499.
\end{flushleft}
ecosystems and the disproportionate negative impact environmental calamities exact on the poor who are least responsible for them.”

It is crucial for the Black Church to be attentive to climate change, global warming, and environmental protections. Fred Bahnson, in Ellen Davis’ *Getting Involved with God*, tells us that “reverence for the earth and reverence for God cannot be separated.” Bahnson furthers the claim by highlighting that “soil is not dirt. It is a living organism, or rather, a collection of organisms, and it must be fed. Soil both craves life and wants to produce more life, even a hundredfold.” On those same lines, Norman Wirzba argues that soil is a complex web of relationships that represents a deeply mysterious bridge, while Willie Jennings extends the conversation on ecology-theology with a racial-ethnic component. In an interview on environment justice, Jennings teaches that “race and place are two sides of the same coin. When you turn land into dirt, you can then turn people into racists.” For example, too often industrial waste is buried in the ground next to poor communities (communities of color), who then are more likely to be affected by pollution, and subject to a higher percentage of health concerns. An eco-theological vision of God’s creation, according to Jennings, is “tied to identity, [and] that to understand who they were, you understand where they were.” We humans need to begin to see ourselves as organically related to the rest of creation.

The environmental crisis creates an opportunity for the Black Church to take ownership and assume our place at the table regarding global issues. We declare to be intentional about

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73 Ibid.
entering and embracing global conversations and making global impacts. We understand that what we do locally impacts what occurs globally. Therefore, we are committed to identifying areas of impact where we are accountable and can make a difference. We seek to lead the church in global sustainability by implementing healthier practices that takes all creation into account. To extend the conversation, Holley says that attentiveness to the global climate issue is an invitation to pursue ecological conversion to ultimately protect our *home*, earth.
2.7 Black Environmentalism: The White and Black Pathways of Race and Place

As global researchers, scientists, and US Congressional leaders propose ways to combat climate change, where is the Black church voice? With the overwhelming scientific consensus about climate change’s projected harms, to what extent does the Black church take ownership in making a collective contribution toward environmental awareness and sustainability? The church can be a leader in fostering such awareness and offering advice regarding practical environmental issues, such as burial and the proper use of resources.

Studies on the environment and the Black community have shown the Black community tends to be less involved in environmental issues than the white community.74 Dorceta Taylor in “Blacks and the Environment” would suggest that the association with the Black community and the environment is complex. Taylor conducted an extensive study on Blacks and the environment and attempted to break down possible reasons for the gap between Black and white involvement regarding the environmental issues.75 Taylor not only details possible explanations for the gaps or the Black community’s lack of concern and activity regarding environmental issues and notes

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74 Studies of Black Environmentalism are well documented and show the Black community as being less active in environmental justice than the white community. Although environmental hazards impact the Black community far greater than the white community, it appears that the interest in environmental issues is lesser in the Black community. Kellert in “Urban American perceptions of animals and the natural Environment” found Black adults to be substantially less interested, concerned, and informed about the natural environment than whites. Kellert and Westervelt in “Children's Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behaviors Toward Animals” found non-white children to be less knowledgeable and less interested in wildlife. More recent research from Johnson, Bowker, Bergstrom, and Cordell in “Wilderness Values in America: Does Immigrant Status or Ethnicity Matter?” which compares wilderness values for African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and whites. It revealed that minority groups were significantly less likely than whites to visit federally designated wilderness areas. Yet, Julia Parker challenges many of the early theories suggesting that “it remains unclear whether differences between African Americans and Euro-Americans are manifest in terms of environmentalism.” However, Parker notes that barriers to environmental behavior, in the form of feelings of powerlessness, are a factor in understanding environmentalism of African Americans; that African Americans are more inclined to participate if it is believed that their actions will make a difference.

the role of the following factors: 1. solidarity; 2. cognitive perception of reality; 3. resources; and 4. psychological factors. Taylor also points out that “the environmental movement could attract more Blacks through an expansion of the civil rights agenda to include environmental issues.”

By mixing and joining the things that already appeal to the Black community, environmental concerns would become more of a priority. Similarly, I seek to join environmental concerns with a foundational principle of the Black Church—covenantal relationship—in hopes of keeping the environmental crisis on its frontal lobe.

Why should an element of race factor in the conversation of an environment in crisis? Michael Northcott in *A Moral Climate* extends the conversation directly towards climate change. Northcott informs us that “humans are in effect in charge of the climate of the planet. This is an important point, and one that too many Christians—both Black and white—have ignored. Yet Global warming disproportionately impacts the poor,” with a high percentage of the poor being people of color. Philip J. Landrigan in the *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* informs us that environmental injustice is “the inequitable and disproportionately heavy exposure of poor, minority, and disenfranchised populations to toxic chemicals and other environmental hazards.” Environmental injustice is highly correlated with other factors that link poverty to poor health, including inadequate access to medical and preventive care, lack of safe play spaces

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76 Ibid., 200. It is worth noting that The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Environmental and Climate Justice Program, recognizes environmental and climate justice as civil rights issue. It seeks to meet the challenge of environmental injustice, including the proliferation of climate change that systematically impacts communities of color and low-income communities in the United States and around the world, by addressing harmful emissions, advancing clean energy, and strengthening resilience and livability in community. The NAACP is a civil rights organization in the United States, formed in 1909 as an interracial endeavor to advance justice for African Americans by a group including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Thurgood Marshall, and many other giants of the civil rights movement. https://naacp.org/know-issues/environmental-climate-justice Accessed February 20, 2022.


for children, lack of access to healthful foods, absence of good jobs, crime, and violence.

Hazardous exposures in the environment are potent causes of disease, disability, and death in persons of all ages and especially in infants and children. Landrigan sites a few factors that are worth repeating here:

Environmental injustice contributes to disparities in health status across populations of different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, such as differences in the incidence and prevalence of asthma (doubled in frequency since 1980), obesity resulting in diabetes (41% of 5-year-old children entering kindergarten in the 5 boroughs of New York City most prevalent in African American and Latino children), lung cancer, and a range of mental health and developmental problems (pre-term birth increased 27% since 1981; neurodevelopmental disorders such as mental retardation and attention deficit/hyperactivity affect 5% to 10% of the 4 million babies each year in the United States).79

Given that the environmental movement could attract more Blacks through an expansion of the civil rights agenda to include environmental issues (Taylor), our approach cannot simply be to hand-over and to be hands-off but to still lean in and to be a partner in the crisis, in the struggle. With the hands-off approach, the Black Church and people of color have been negligent (a too risky position) in our behavior towards the environment and global sustainability issues. We can do more.

In recent decades, we have all been encouraged to participate in recycling, in which Black families across America have played their part. From the kitchen—the center of the

79 Ibid. In addition, Dan Leif in “Editor’s Opinion: We all have a role in advancing racial justice,” Plastics: Recycling Update (A Resource Recycling, Corporation Publication) reports that “In many communities, waste facilities are sited closer to the homes of minority populations than to the neighborhoods of whites. A 2007 study from the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries found people of color make up most residents living within 1.8 miles of America’s hazardous waste facilities. A 2016 study from University of Michigan researchers looked at over 30 years’ worth of data and found a troubling pattern of cities targeting minority neighborhoods when building hazardous waste operations. It is this type of geographic disparity – in waste and recycling, as well as in other industrial sectors – that has contributed to the fact that minority populations in this country bear the brunt of industrial pollution. Research from the University of Minnesota and the National Science Foundation has found people of color in the U.S. are on average exposed to 38% more nitrogen dioxide than whites (nitrogen dioxide is a widespread air pollutant formed when fossil fuels are burned)” (accessed March 5, 2021 https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2020/06/10/editors-opinion-we-all-have-a-role-in-advancing-racial-justice/).
house—we have chosen to participate in local city recycling initiatives, correctly taking care of
our plastics and glass, and the proper handling of hazardous materials. Yet, as James Cone in
“Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” suggests, “People of color are not treated seriously, that is, as if
they have something essential to contribute to the conversation.” Cone argues that ecology
touches every sphere of human existence, and so he expands his Black liberation theology to
include not only the fight for justice for life but also the ecological efforts to create a mutual
ecological dialogue. He aims to have the Black voice taken seriously inside of conversations
about the environment and asks, “How can we create a genuinely mutual ecological dialogue
between whites and people of color if one party acts as if they have all the power and
knowledge?” He recognizes the problem that the Black Church is not asked to the table when
decisions are being made on such matters. I agree with Cone’s assertions because having
representation already at the table presents a greater magnitude to attract others of like kind to
join and to get involved. So, Cone thus gives impetus to the reclaiming of the earth as our home
and encourages the Black Church and its community that it can speak to and live out this
environmental embodiment.

COVID-19 has called America to the outdoors where walking is encouraged with the
touch of the sun on the face and the coat of the wind around the shoulders. The Black Church has
a complicated connectedness to the environment, whether by force or by nature. Cassandra
Johnson and Josh McDaniel in “Turpentine Negro” speak of the woods as sanctuary and a
pathway to freedom for the enslaved. Dianne Glave in “Rural African American Women,

81 Ibid., 121.
Gardening, and Progressive Reform in the South”83 expands our diversified look in the African American story by capturing the beauty of planting, flowers, and gardening for many African American women. Yet American environmentalism, with its Western way of thinking and of being, has found a way to capitalize and to lure society away from such natural beauty. Often, the Black community looks to what can be bought more than what is natural, the shinier the better. Thus, the Black Church is obligated to help us find a path to what is right and true.

Even though at times there are feelings of despair, the Black Church must stay focused on the work that is to be done before Christ returns. This means not forsaking the earth. Even though this world is not our eternal home, God has graciously given us the earth as home and has made us one with it. Therefore, we cannot overlook the way in which we should be in harmony with the earth.

2.7.1 Strengthening the Marriage between the Black Church and the Environment: Toward a New Aesthetic in Black Environmentalism

The Black community values its aesthetic genius, and some in the church consider this aspect of Black life to be sacred. Theologian Kenyatta Gilbert in Exodus Preaching suggests that the sacred encompasses the realities of God, revealed truths, and highest moral values.84 There is still a more excellent way for the Black Church that requires a reclaiming of that highest moral ethic. Yet, this higher moral ethic comes at a cost—the trading of the shiny (temporal) for the eternal. Our aesthetic genius is more fully realized when it is aligned with the will of God.

83 Glave, “Rural African American Women.”
84 Kenyatta Gilbert, Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons About Justice and Hope, Abingdon Press, 2018
The Black Church already holds the key to strengthening its relationship with the environment through the principle of covenental relationship. By embodying commitment and love for the surrounding community and the environment (its neighbors), the Black Church has the potential to be widely recognized as a womb, a center, and the soul of the community. If we see creation as beautiful and precious, as God does, this will determine how we use or interact with it. Conversely, how we care for creation impacts how beautiful the church is before God. It can be argued that “if the love that one shares is not precious than the question can be posed, is it love?” Currently, our treatment of earth—how we think about and care for earth—is not precious (pure and holy). In our funeral practices, we have an opportunity to embrace a new aesthetic that is aligned with God’s estimation of and care for creation. Ellen Davis argues that “holiness in Leviticus is not primarily the quality of individuals; holiness is the character of a community observing a comprehensive pattern of life that is healthful and harmonious.”85 I extend Davis’ argument by stating that a pure (holy) treatment of earth is a show of thanks and certainly a show of love.

How best to argue persuasively for the reimagining, reclaiming, and creating of a new aesthetic between the Black Church and the environment? Forged in solidarity, the Black Church has always emphasized and engaged in social services, now it can help the Black community reclaim its grounding and freedom in relation to the environment. One approach is to look to the Black Church and its ecclesial leaders to partake in and then take ownership in this movement. The Black Church is historically a place of unification, strength, and purpose. Victor Anderson in “The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual,” tells us that despite its issues, “the Church is one place where our public and private commitments meet. Sometimes

they meet in agreement and sometimes not.”⁸⁶ According to Lincoln and Mamiya in The Black Church in the African American Experience, the Black Church “has no challenger as the cultural womb of the Black community.”⁸⁷ Yet, to what extent is this concept (still) valid? Christopher J. Beeley describes the “soul” as the center of a person’s life—our values, commitments, and choices, our thoughts and feelings, our memories and hopes for the future.⁸⁸ Although historic by nature, might the Black Church be a place of centering and guidance, despite its issues? Anderson would agree that many still stay and seek to forge a better tomorrow even if the Black Church appears to be the church of their yesterday. God is still birthing and speaking through the Black Church’s womb, and it is important for the community to listen. I argue that it is from this womb that better practices of environmental and ecological awareness can be forged even better than before. With this stance, the Black Church can gain (or reclaim) a foot inside of the hopes and dreams of its people. Today we can start anew.

2.8 A More Excellent Way

All of this presents real challenges for the Black Church that desires to exhibit a strong ecological faith. The Black Church funerals have participated in the starvation and the polluting of the soil. The funeral industry models create space for the morticians, ecclesial leaders, and even grieving families to become hazardous material handlers; and to participate as pollutants of the earth. The handling of the body as it decomposes—whether in a tomb, mausoleum, grave,

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earth, or water, or by exposure to the elements or by carrion-consuming animals—should be viewed in relationship to creation.

As this thesis seeks to point the Black Church in the direction of ecological sensitivity, the prevailing thought is that as we develop “our relationship with God, our materialistic values will be challenged and transformed.” By making shifts in practices and behaviors inside the Black funeral, the Black Church can be successful toward embodying care for God’s creation. Ellen Davis would call this having a healthy or a wholesome materiality—turning from rampant materialism—where your commitment to living with a holy awareness of what God loves is heightened. Let us honor the body even in death—both human bodies, living and dead, and the earth’s body. In life the human body is sacred and considered a temple. So, let us participate in deathcare in the most life-giving of ways as we give our loved ones back to God.

As we turn our attention to Part II, Conscientization Chapter Three, we look to empirical data that highlights many of the problems and concerns of the impact of traditional funeral practices on the environment and the larger community. We look deeper into how carrying the load of the casket might speak to other much larger predicaments involving the earth, ecological faith, and environmental justice.

89 Ibid.
90 Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, 190. Davis suggests that a healthy materiality is the first principle of a biblical ecology.
Chapter 3. Raised Awareness

3.1 The Impact of Traditional Funeral Practices on The Environment

Lee Webster, formerly of the Green Burial Council and author of *Changing Landscapes*, offers this shocking analysis:

Each year in the U.S., 22,500 traditional cemeteries put roughly the following into our soil: a) 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, 97.5 tons of steel, 2,028 tons of concrete, and 56,250 board feet of high-quality tropical hardwood in just one acre of land; b) Each cremation releases between .8 and 5.9 grams of mercury as bodies are burned. This amounts to between 1,000 and 7,800 pounds of mercury released each year in the U.S. 75% goes into the air and the rest settles into the ground and water; c) With embalmers at an 8+ times higher risk of contracting leukemia (Journal of the National Cancer Institute, 11.24.09) and a 3 times higher risk of ALS (Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry, 7.13.15), and (d) You could drive about 4,800 miles on the energy equivalent of the energy used to cremate someone – and to the moon and back 85 times from all cremations in one year in the U.S.).

The impact of traditional funeral practices—embalming, cremations, and burials—is quite disturbing, especially when the church seeks first to do no harm. With such analysis, the Black Church can take inventory of its actions toward engaging in better funeral practices and taking better care of creation.

According to the 2020 National Funeral Director Association (NFDA) Cremation & Burial Report, in 2020, the projected burial rate is 37.5% (down 7.7% from 2015) and projected cremation rate is 56.0% (up 8.1% from 2015). At the same time, air studies in North Carolina show air pollution to be of grave concern. John Clarence Scarborough, III of Scarborough &

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92 According to their website www.nfda.org, the National Funeral Director Association (NFDA) is the world’s largest association in support of funeral professionals providing the most comprehensive innovative tools and resources for the funeral director.
94 Duke Health, “Higher Rates of Alzheimer’s Deaths, Hospitalizations Correlate with Air Pollution”
Hargett Funeral Home, Durham, North Carolina, asserts that cremations in North Carolina are trending upward. However, he admits that White funerals are leading the way in cremations. Scarborough shares that Black funeral practices tend to be more old-fashioned, with, for instance, *viewings* —the display and observation of an embled body—continuing to remain in favor much longer. Nevertheless, there is no disputing that cremations are on the rise. Therefore, the attention to what is being put into the air (environment) remains of upmost concern. Dominique Mosbergen in “Death Has a Climate Change Problem” argues that concern about the environment impact of conventional burial and cremation mounts.

The toxic environmental impact of traditional funeral practices needs to be considered by Black churches, for whom funeral rites and rituals are of great importance. Although shifts have been observed in the funeral industry (i.e., the creation of a “funeral director”; viewing deceased bodies at home versus conducting viewings at the funeral home; having more closed casket funerals), in America, The Wall Street Journal contends that baby boomers are fiercely transforming the industry with the demand for simpler and far less expensive methods of funeralizing with the use of cremations. As seen in previous chapters, Black Church funerals have been preserved and, for most spiritual and practical purposes, have been slow to adaptation and change. Might economics be a factor in the slow adaptation to change? The Wall Street

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Journal continues: “The average funeral with a casket and burial vault costs about $5,300, giving the funeral home a profit of about $750. A cremation, including the urn, costs about $2,600, with the funeral home making a profit of about $600. A cremation with no service or urn costs about $1,000.”

As seen with the rise in cremations, a change in practice would impact the financial models on which these businesses have been built. This is a logical rationale for resistance because more ecologically responsible funeral practices are less economically profitable given the current personal and material resources that support the current toxic models. Yet, the toxic environmental impact of traditional funeral practices can no longer be overlooked by Black churches, for whom funeral practices, rites, and rituals are critical. Traditional funeral practices with conventional burials and cremations are problematic:

1) Embalming inputs chemicals into the deceased body, all the while, presenting a dangerous environment to the worker. Then the body is often cremated or buried.

2) During cremation, fossil fuels and toxic metals are released into the air at an alarming rate. Cremations are now the number one deathcare practice in the United States; and

3) Burial grounds are overtaxed by tons of synthetic materials which prohibits plant life and reproduction. Burials are ranked second in deathcare practice in the United States.

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98 Ibid.
3.2 The Ecological Crisis, Environmental Theology, and Ecological Faith

As we and our loved ones move towards death, we often turn towards God for comfort and hope. But do we think about God and how our death relates to God’s created order—that is, to the environment? I will explore environmental theology—the ecology of God—to propose a revised approach to decisions about burials and deathcare with the consideration of products and services relating to cremation, burials, and other processes of dying.100

In the late 1960s, Rachel Carson in Silent Spring analyzed the impact that the distribution of chlorinated hydrocarbons had on animals and the environment. Today, climate change, accompanied by global warming, is a good example of an environmental crisis that impacts all.101 “The ecological crisis may be the most far-reaching theological crisis ever to confront the

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101 “Our extinction is imminent,” proclaims Saint Lucia’s Prime Minister, Allen Chastanet as he addressed the UN after visiting the Bahamas. UN Conference on Trade and Development, “No exit plan for small islands on climate crisis frontlines,” (9/10/10) [https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2186]


“Every major oil company is betting heavily against a 1.5-degree Celsius world and investing in projects that are contrary to the Paris goals” according to Carbon Tracker’s co-author. Reuters, “Big Oil undermines U.N. climate goals with $50 billion of new projects” (9/6/19) [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-oil/big-oil-undermines-u-n-climate-goals-with-50-billion-of-new-projects-report-idUSKCN1VQ2WC] Accessed October 11, 2021

Human behavior contributes to climate change. “It has been clear for decades that the Earth’s climate is changing, and the role of human influence on the climate system is undisputed,” said French scientist Valerie Masson-Delmotte. The article continues to proclaim that “the evidence is clear that carbon dioxide (CO2) is the main driver of climate change, even as other greenhouse gases and air pollutants also affect the climate.” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) “Climate Change widespread, rapid, and intensifying (8/9/21) [https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/]

“Although variability is large, trends associated with human influences are evident in the environment in which hurricanes form, and our physical understanding suggests that the intensity of and rainfalls from hurricanes are probably increasing”, even if this increase cannot yet be proven with a formal statistical test argues J. T. Houghton
church,”

says Ellen Davis in *Getting Involved with God*. Although some may not agree with Davis’ conclusion, the anticipated impact of climate change if humans don’t act to cut carbon emissions are astronomical. “Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe,”

says United Nations Chef Antonio Guterres. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states that some of the changes are maybe irreversible but “there is still time to limit climate change.”

The IPCC urges our world to act in attempts to keep our global warming temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius and in efforts to avoid suffering additional extreme events such as exceptional heatwaves.

In addition to the problems created by climate change, breaking down the barriers to food production and eliminating the lack of proximity to preservation of food and the reliance on processed food is “the clarion call for people all over this earth,”

says Betty Holley. While the Black Church did not create the ecological crisis, it is not something the church can ignore. If we don’t care for the land and thus our fellow humans in daily living, then how can we care about land amid dying?

Davis argues that “the fruitful yet fragile beauty of the fertile earth constitutes an ongoing call of responsibility, and for many of us, repentance, and a change of life.”

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104 Ibid.
105 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Global Warming of 1.5C Special Report https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/ Accessed February 28, 2022
we (the Black Church) handle the dead contributes to injurious behavior toward the environment. Funeral industry practices are problematic because they pollute and reflect a perversion of our relationship with God because of the way that they seek to deny our “dustiness”. The church has uncritically embraced these practices. This perversion starts well before the actual funeral day. It begins with a thought or the perception that closeness to natural death and the decay that naturally follows is unhealthy. Candi Cann in “Black Deaths Matter Earning the Right to Live” asserts that “embalming the deceased generally means that visitation will be held.”\textsuperscript{108} This normalized practice creates a perception that a deceased body that is not embalmed cannot be gathered around. A lack of knowledge (and in some cases, simply, a lack of action) about the toxic impact of the funeral industry on the environment has impacted us all. Yet, the funeral industry has long benefited, or at minimum, relied on the sales of shiny caskets, embalming, and vaults that separate us from the ground and ultimately from a full complete natural death and decomposition.

Funeral industry models create space for morticians, ecclesial leaders, and even grieving families to become hazardous material handlers and polluters of the earth, thereby compromising our faith and covenant with God. As I have already pointed out, within the Black Church funerals are occasions when what is to be honored and what is “beautiful” is often polluted—hence the use of embalming, buying fancy coffins, etc. With the right vision that incorporates environmental concerns, what is thought of as “beautiful” can be seen as truly ugly, sinful, and disobedient. We can see these practices as acts of covetousness. In buying fancy coffins, we create idols of our wealth and dishonor our ancestry in the process. Regarding such behavior, Everett Fox in \textit{The Five Books of Moses} would suggest we look to Leviticus for

Fox asserts that Leviticus 19 is rhetorically powerful and extends holiness to virtually every area of our lives to include ethics and relations a) regarding land, plants, and animals which are our neighbors. It matters how we engage our fellow non-human creatures; verse 18 says “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”, and b) between people. As Leviticus 19:1-5 states:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God. When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable in your behalf.

Holiness not only involves the consideration of—how we think of then what we do with—our bodies but it also includes land. God’s instructions to keep “my sabbaths” and in Leviticus 25:1-4 God instructs Israel to observe a sabbath rest of the land every seven years. In addition to Fox, Jacob Milgrom in Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics asserts that the holiness source (H) is where “the domain of the sacred expands, embracing the entire land, not just the sanctuary, and all of Israel, not just the priesthood.” Milgrom speaks to Leviticus 25 and sabbath for the land where there is a need for land to take a rest toward redemption and growth. Milgrom declares that land sabbath is a complement to sacrifices. With sabbath, one can immediately give and get care for the land. If we are called to let the land rest, then surely that means we are to care for the land’s health and not to pollute it. Likewise, no pollution is also comely for our dead bodies and the land. According to the precepts of Leviticus, caring for the

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health of the earth is holy and right, not just for the soil’s sake, but for ours, as we are organically related covenant partners with the land. For today’s church, there is a need for a change in thinking so that our understanding of covenant expands to include the whole of creation.

3.3 The Covenant Triangle—Let There Be No Separation Between You and The Dust of The Ground

"Reverence for the earth and reverence for God cannot be separated," argues Davis. God’s covenantal relationship is with Israel (people) and the land. This bond cannot be separated. Indeed, there is a connectivity (a connectedness) that should not be broken or neither should space be forged between. To live out our covenantal destiny through attentiveness to our final return to the land is indeed beautiful. Creation is good and so we should not distance ourselves from it with barriers and pollutants. According to Davis, adamah represents fertile-soil where God reached to the land to create an image of God. God loves the soil (land) and what God loves is valuable. We must love and be good stewards of what God loves. Unfortunately, this bond to creation is often broken and violated. It is not farfetched to view our lives as often not being attentive, and at times, actively toxic toward what God loves, gifted, and covenanted: land. With an agrarian reading of the Bible, priority would be placed on the care of land. But if we seek to be attentive, obedient, and strengthen our covenant relationship, then we should remember God’s promise, “I will remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land” (Lev

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111 Ellen Davis, Getting Involved, 184.
112 The land includes the plants and the animals, as well. (Genesis 9)
113 Ellen Davis, Opening Israel’s Scriptures, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 22. Here, Davis further explains that soil is “the substance from which human life is drawn and on which it depends.”
With this covenantal language, Davis strongly suggests that we are obligated to be attentive to the inseparability of our reverence for the earth and for God.

Davis speaks to the covenantal triangle and how humans and the land are covenant partners with God and how they either flourish together or suffer together. Leviticus further extends the goodness theme with the joining of care—covenantal loyalty—with obedience.

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid. (Leviticus 26:3-6)

Our toxic burial practices are but one instance of humanity’s mistreatment of creation that violate God’s statutes to exercise proper dominion over the earth. These verses in Leviticus 26 highlight what is at stake. In our transgression we put ourselves in jeopardy of disrupting the earth’s geological processes that make human life possible: regular rains and a healthy agricultural system. But if we seek to be obedient, to strengthen our conventual relationship, and to better care for creation then we shall reap the benefits of rain, fruit, and shall lie down without fear or tremble.

Humanity, especially our church leaders, is called to the ground literally and figuratively, to be in covenant too with the land. Yet, we have broken the covenant by overlooking our toxic behavior. Davis acknowledges this as a violation of covenant (disobedience) and the undoing of the world. Thus, causing all of creation to suffer.

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a

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curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore, the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. (Isaiah 24:4-6)

Here, the world is far from its original intent where judgment has now been brought upon it because the people have violated an everlasting covenant. It behooves us not to repeat or be in jeopardy of repeating a violation of the everlasting covenant. But as we return to the ground, let us gain a greater sensitivity toward creation and participate in the wearing of each other.

3.4  As We Return to The Ground, Let Us Wear Each Other

Ellen Davis in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* asserts that Leviticus is “a theologically profound vision of the complexity and interdependence of the created order, and grapples with the difficult question of humans may responsibly participate in that order.”¹¹⁵ Yet Davis states that there is a widespread Christian disregard for Leviticus.¹¹⁶ This might give the impression that it has less urgency or relevance than other books of the Bible. Leviticus—Hebrew: *torat kohanim* or the Priest’s Manual (Instruction)—might be viewed as instruction for the “priests” only, but it is a book for all of us. Davis’ scholarly approach names Leviticus as the “profound connection between humans and land—specifically, arable land, the proximate source of all plant and animal life. Leviticus views land as a complex material reality fraught with religious and spiritual significance.”¹¹⁷ For this examination, Davis’ continued thought is of most importance: “Land was the means of subsistence for nearly every Israelite and thus could also be seen as a mirror of human existence, an extended sanctuary, and a partner in covenant and agent

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¹¹⁵ Ibid., 83.
¹¹⁶ Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 62.
¹¹⁷ Ibid, 77.
of covenant justice.” Therefore, to be good stewards of the land is to fix the way one sees oneself in relation to it—in covenant relationship.

Davis in *Preaching the Luminous Word* describes royal priesthood as *wearing each other before God*. Davis expounds on how Aaron, Israel’s first high priest, “wore the breastplate of judgment into the sanctuary—all goldwork, and studded with twelve great jewels, each engraved with the name of one of the tribes of Israel.” Aaron, literally, wore the tribes of Israel over his heart into God’s presence. Merriam-Webster defines *wear* as to bear, to carry on the person, or to hold the rank, dignity, or position. Likewise, I extend the thought of *wearing each other*—where there is no separation between us—as creatures of God’s creation: carrying, caring, and holding the dignity of one another unto life and death so that no harm is done to the other; but beautification and holiness unto the heavens. However, *wearing each other*, for some, may be burdensome because the wearing may signify a dependence on or an interdependence and the need for responsibility. Therefore, the concept may be rejected.

But moreover, Davis teaches that the “goal of Leviticus is that Israel should live out its Sinai-based vocation to be a holy people.” (Exodus 19:6) Leviticus speaks to those who are striving to be God’s holy people. The Black Church seeks to live out what it means to be God’s holy people. Its rituals—communion, weddings, funerals, etc.—are the protocols for reverential acts with communal involvement that provide ways to deal with sin and death. As a member of the Black Church, we practice rituals and holds them sacred. Moreover, we believe that our

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118 Ibid.
121 Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 72.
covenant relationship with God is strengthened through the execution, implementation, and the embodying of ritual. Not only is there a call to ritual but a call to the ground in foundational holiness and purification in lifestyle, in being, and in becoming.

A fundamental characteristic of God is holiness, which all of God’s people should seek to embody. Israel Knohl in *The Sanctuary of Silence* notices the unique covenant built on the intimacy and the closeness that God has with Israel. Knohl suggests that God is near to creation and looks over it, and that our obedience to God’s *holy code* comes with benefits and violations come with punishments. From holiness comes righteousness, and from righteousness comes justice (criminal, social, psychological, and/or environmental).²³ Israel became idolatrous and not single-minded. Israel forgot that they were God’s possession. Following this investigation, it is safe to say that we are not to be polluters of this world, and we risk becoming idolatrous when our attention is distracted from what is central—God. Specifically, let us not be defilers of land with the placement of toxic chemicals. Expounding on Leviticus 18:28, Davis declares that the land has a moral sensitivity—an agency of a land that vomits out its defilers.²⁴ Davis asserts “that the land cares how we use or misuse it.”²⁵ Holiness extends itself to the ground where the Black Church can benefit from a “sensitivity that perceives land a living being.”²⁶

There is mystery in the ground—the fertile-soil. Yet, God is calling us to it and to find the glory that is inevitably attached to it and therefore to us.²⁷ Davis states that “from a *deep green* perspective of Leviticus, land is an active participant in covenantal living.”²⁸

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²⁴ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 110.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.


²⁸ Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 72.
25:23 tells us that “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity (beyond reclaim), for the land is mine [the Lord’s]; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” Our grounding should be cemented only in covenant relationship and not in possession. God calls us to “lie down in green pastures” (Ps 23: 2), and to “lie down in peace and to not be afraid” (Lev 26:6). Yet, when we use harmful chemicals in burial, we threaten turning these “green pastures” into toxic graveyards and thus preventing the possibility of lying down in peace. These “lie down” statements apply not only in life but also in death, as we return to the soil by cremation, burial, or exposure. God is calling us to the ground—to God’s pastures, the fields, the earth, to be meek and lowly—to reclaim foundational principles and theologies that are natural and of nature and embrace our creaturely status. Also, God promises to raise us up again. Thus, there is no need to put money in the ground—silver and gold—for we shall be raised in the glory of the Lord. This is beautiful!

As we are called to the ground—literally and figuratively speaking—let us not be distracted by the “flashy” but remember that living within our limits is comely and beautiful, says Davis. With this agrarian reading of Leviticus—one that reads with a culture of preservation and care of the land at its heart—our hope is to acquire the beauty and the blessing that resides in the materials of creation.

Certainly, there rests a beauty in honoring covenantal relationships. Davis argues that when we open our eyes to see, at times, there is a pain; yet the experience of seeing is always accompanied by surprise. Seeing with God and with God’s original intent brings about a wholesomeness and a healthiness that is indeed beautiful. Failure to see and obey, to guard

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130 Ibid. According to Davis, this concept is based on Abraham Heschel’s study of the Prophets.
and to live into holy awareness comes at a cost, a separation from God (see Lev 26:19-20 on disobedience). As I extend the argument to funeral practices: How might sowing our seeds “in vain” relate to burying money in fancy coffins? How might poisonous burial practices make the “earth like copper” and the lands infertile? (Lev 26:19-20) “Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore, glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.”\footnote{1 Cor 6:19-20} Here is a theology of the body—the body as a temple or a tomb. Might our disobedience toward the things of God cost or cause separation from, or forge space between, us and God? God cannot and will not abide in a polluted temple.\footnote{Milgrom, 
Leviticus, 9, 32.} Again, the fruitful yet fragile beauty of the fertile earth constitutes an ongoing call of responsibility, repentance, and a change of life.

As we return to the ground, are we, in essence, denying our beauty or dustiness by prolonging the decaying process? But let us wear each other continually, as Davis proclaims, “so that heaven may be more beautiful.”\footnote{Davis, 
Preaching the Luminous Word, 37.} So, therefore, taking on the Levitical priestly posture to lead; and not to be (as Brueggemann describes) “robbed of the courage and power to think an alternative thought,”\footnote{Walter Brueggemann, 
The Prophetic Imagination, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001, 39.} but that as 1 Peter 2:9 which calls for the royal priesthood to come into the marvelous light.

3.5 The Doctrine of Creation: Attentiveness to Our Creation and Aesthetics

Colin Gunton in The Doctrine of Creation suggests that it is time to reconsider the
\footnote{131} doctrine of creation. One reason for reconsidering, Gunton argues, is to gain a clarifying view of
in the beginning by focusing on human action in and toward the world.\(^{135}\) Willie Jennings asserts that to gain a healthy and mature doctrine of creation, one must have a deep sense of connectivity—one not simply rooted in domination.\(^{136}\) We must embody an understanding of priesthood in which we lead in the things of God and are co-creatures with other creatures. In Davis' exploration of Genesis 1, Davis boldly asserts that “there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship.”\(^{137}\) If this is so, it is in keeping with the covenant God made with the land.

Genesis 9 clearly states that God is not only in covenant with Noah but is in covenant with set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”\(^{138}\) Davis speaks to Genesis as housing God’s everlasting covenant with Noah and earth, the fertile-soil. This fertile-soil is potent ground ripe for gestation, preservation, and reproduction. In other words, the soil is healthy—ripe for something to happen, for birthing, and a move of God. Soil is a complex web of relationships that represents a deeply mysterious bridge, says Norman Wirzba in Thanks for the Dirt.\(^{139}\) Therefore, Wirzba contends, soil is sacred and holy. Because of the convincing arguments of scholars like Wirzba and Davis, churches should encourage families

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\(^{135}\) Colin Gunton, The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy. NY, NY: T. & T. Clark, 1997, 2, 5. Gunton says that the doctrine of creation is different from that of Christology; where Christology is concerned with God’s involvement in the world ‘already’ made; but creation has to do with the constituting of that world. Gunton suggests moving beyond the ‘largely’ ecological to include other dimensions, specifically, the aesthetics/art. Gunton says that art involves one of the many human ways of relating to the material world. Gunton further asserts that “so anxious have theologians been to demonstrate the credibility of the doctrine of creation by using the natural world to provide evidence of its truth, that the reverse relation [using truth, aesthetics and art of the material world, to provide evidence of the natural world] has been neglected.”

\(^{136}\) Wille Jennings, “What Does Theology Say About Ecology?” Yale Divinity School Quadcast. Accessed December 29, 2021 https://soundcloud.com/yaleuniversity/the-quadcast-what-does-theology-say-about-ecology From Augustine, Conf. 12.7. to Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1969 to the present the church/Christians continue to speak regarding creation. The goal here is aid in the framing of creation around God’s original intent of closeness without separation of Creator and creation and the relationship that exists not only between but inside of the two.

\(^{137}\) Ellen Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

\(^{138}\) Genesis 9:13

and insist that the funeral industry adopt and advance practices that are minimally injurious to the earth.

Additionally, there exists a theme of goodness in Genesis 1. “God saw everything he had made, and indeed it was very good.” (1:31) Goodness is extended to the production of that which is good—“be fruitful and multiple.” (1:28) As Davis skillfully ties creation and goodness to beauty by teaching us that the fruitfulness is as fragile beauty that constitutes an ongoing call to responsibility and/or repentance, the concept or ideology of the fragile beauty is worth weighing inside of the Black church funeral practices toward our response to the goodness of God.

In Genesis 2, we witness the attentiveness of God toward creation in a placement of Adam in the garden—an indication of blessings, goodness, beauty, and paradise. According to Davis, the relationship of the word Adam to adamah shows how closely related humans are to the fertile soil (or our “dustiness”) This further bridges the inseparability of God, land, and people with blessings for creation: rain, fertility, and harvest. Yet with blessings and placement comes expectation of covenantal loyalty. But Davis makes a critical point of divine intentions with a wider view of placement and having dominion as one “of skilled mastery that represents God and God’s interest where God intends humans, other creatures and the land itself to flourish.” But when dominion goes wrong, as seen in the flood narrative in Genesis 6, God has to step in Genesis 9 showing what loyalty look like.

Based on these scholarly reviews, I ask the question today, “Are our practices in line with God’s goodness and love toward creation?” Certainly, we do not want our sowing of God’s seed to be in vain, or our practices to make the earth like copper and infertile lands (Lev 26:19-20).

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140 Lack of loyalty with humanity’s lawlessness and violence (Genesis 6—dominion gone wrong) leads to God’s destruction of the earth, which God then makes allowances for in Genesis 9.
141 Davis, Opening Israel’s Scriptures, 8-13.
Today, might God be dissatisfied with our treatment of or lack of attentiveness towards creation, our handling or harming or the ground and environment?

3.5.1 The True Nature of Beauty: A Strong Covenantal Relationship is Christian Beauty

Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) can assist the Black church and its community in adjusting its aesthetic of beauty—its views and behaviors—regarding funerals toward an alternative aesthetic of beauty. Bishop Ambrose, largely known for his role in converting Saint Augustine to Christianity and maybe less known for his treatise *On the Duties of the Clergy*, which is relevant here, was an important figure in the early church. Regarding his death, he instructed ecclesial leaders to guide God’s people to “Put off, O Jerusalem, the garment of thy mourning and affliction. and clothe thyself in beauty, the glory which God hath given thee forever.”¹⁴² For the Church, its ecclesial leadership and community, this is a message that needs affirmation.

I emphasize three elements of Ambrose’s thought that can be helpful to Black churches in embracing a stronger ecological theology related to funeral practices. First, Ambrose affirms “the beauty of the perishable body, which will come to an end with sickness or old age but the reputation for good deserts, subject to no accidents and never to perish.”¹⁴³ Ambrose continues: “you, too, have indeed your own beauty, furnished by the comeliness of virtue, not of the body, to which age puts not an end, which death cannot take away, nor any sickness injure. Let God alone be sought as the judge of loveliness, who loves even in less beautiful bodies the more beautiful souls.”¹⁴⁴ Ambrose takes our site off the perishable or the corruptible and places it on

¹⁴³ Ibid., 812
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., Chapter VI, 805.
the incorruptible. In other words, it is not material beauty that constitutes true beauty, but the goodness of souls, which outlive worldly trappings.

So too, Black churches are obligated to put off the old garment of not considering or prioritizing creation and at the time of death, but clothe itself in the beauty, the glory of creation which God has already graciously given. But how does what Ambrose says and believes shape what we might think about death in the Church? I argue that this pursuit of perfection or beauty extends even into death and funeral processing. Dr Betty Holley would suggest that the Church has largely been silent on climate change and environmental degradation and has not at the very least formed a united voice towards ways to reduce its negative ecological footprint. Likewise, the Black Church should create space and form a collective voice toward an ecological theology regarding deathcare.

Second, Ambrose extends Plato’s thought of wisdom of the flesh to wisdom from God. Wisdom and virtue bind the whole city, the Republic, (the soul) together. For Plato, wisdom is to know the good. For Ambrose, wisdom is devotion and reference to God as the Supreme good, the good bound to Abraham and the God of Abraham, the good bound in the covenant relationship of God, land, and people. If God says it is good and prudent, must we the Church not see it as such? Advocating for the care of the earth, the holy usage of and engagement with the land, is the kind of perfection that a bereavement ministry seeks with funeral processing. Ambrose would suggest for the Church not to pollute the mind but to be healthy in soul.

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Thirdly, for Ambrose, wisdom is to justice as faith is to piety—there is not one without the other. Relatedly, there is no separation of wisdom and justice—just one form of virtue divided up.\textsuperscript{147} God is the source of all things, so we never own anything. In the Black Church, our highest piety is to God and not to our parental and other relationships. Ambrose suggests that piety, which includes modesty and decorum, reveals the integrity of the life of the inner person and the action of the outer person reveals something about their character.\textsuperscript{148} Ambrose is concerned about clergy taking on a certain persona of affectation or something that is not real. For Ambrose, to see beauty in one’s authentic self, in modesty and purity, is to prove what is the good, acceptable, and the perfect will of God. Ambrose would suggest that modesty is what we all should have versus an arrogance where one points to oneself even as one witness of God: I must decrease that God might increase. Might these thoughts extend to creation and our behaviors toward the environment? Faith in God becomes the priority to our leadership, Ambrose would tell us. If God is the supreme being, then we have the absolute dependence on God in life and even more so in death.

At the time of death and funeral processing, the Church must perfect its hope in God, accepting that “to dust you shall return,”\textsuperscript{149} and that there is no separation of what is mortal from what is dust. As we return to the dust let us perfect the ways in which we care for the earth and ensure that we are not polluting our return and the source of our future sustenance. We are to take care of what God has gifted. We must return to the earth in the most life-giving of ways—fulfilling God’s purpose for creation. As we return to the dust and the earth an appropriate human response to the sacred is to allow the land to now feed from or be joined to us without

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., Introduction, 28.  
\textsuperscript{149} Genesis 3:19
barriers. Yet we live in bubbles—bubbles of control and comfort. But in doing so, we impact and shape ecological realities even if we are not aware of them, or we try to ignore them if we are aware. So, these bubbles are idolatrous creations that ignore the truth of our creatureliness, especially in relation to the rest of creation.

3.5.2 The Beauty of Creation Care

Again, it is appropriate for Black churches to embody a theology of ecology where priesthood represents leadership in the things of God and acknowledges that we are co-creatures with other creatures. Community leaders and ecclesial leaders must direct us towards the care of creation and being better stewards of the land. Willie Jennings states that “we must first recognize that we are possessed by (belong to God), and so therefore, we have limited possession of what we claim as our own.”150 With these foundational principles of Jennings and other assertions by Davis, Knohl, Fox, and Brueggemann that our connectivity to the land is holy and covenantal, the New Interpreter’s Bible guides the Church further into its place as a royal priesthood—its beauty, majesty, and splendor—as found in Isaiah 62:3; Deuteronomy 7:6, and 1 Pet 2:9 that says, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”151

The New Interpreter’s Bible points us to Colossians where the inheritance of God's people moves beyond the terrestrial and into the transcendent realm of light.152 Light has

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151 1 Pet 2:9 is a very familiar scripture in the Black Church and is often read from the King James Version (KJV).
connotations of transcendent splendor, the environment of the heavenly world, and of holiness and ethical purity, as seen in Colossians 1:12-14 that says “giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”\textsuperscript{153} We are enthroned—sharing in the inheritance—by God’s divine power. This enthronement invokes the show of divine love to others—especially the marginalized—the least, the left out, and the lonely. For the church to embody our royal priesthood, we must see all creation as part of our concern and care. We are in the midst of God’s majesty and splendor: the grass of the fields and the flowers of the trees. We must be attentive to the state of the wind, the sea, and the rocks; and what they teach us. The majesty and splendor of God is continual and never ceasing or failing. For many, the natural world might not appear to be great or of much value. However, the church is called to join the psalmist in affirming that “the earth is the Lords and the fullness there of”(Psalm 24). Let the glory of the Lord rise amongst us. Let us be transformed and engaged in the metamorphic beauty of God.

3.6 Creation Care: Peace, Shalom, and Wellbeing

It is in the best interest of the Black Church to practice eco-theological awareness for convergence, community, honoring our covenantal relationship, and simply, for peace—not only for the sake of living in peace but to live a transformative life that is life-changing and life-giving. Unfortunately, as Fred Bahnson shares in Soil and Sacrament, “We have tilled the

\textsuperscript{153} Instead of saying who has enabled you, other ancient authorities read who has called you
adamah but have not kept it.”\textsuperscript{154} In death we have too often poisoned the soil; or at minimum, failed to allow the soil to eat, to feast, and to live from us. As we return to the soil, the church has the opportunity to foster peace and beauty inside of the death and funeral processing.

This thesis seeks not only to raise awareness about toxic consequences of traditional funeral practices, but to point the Black Church toward an ecological theology with a true essence of beauty and a “life that is healthful.”\textsuperscript{155} Wisdom is the ability to discern God’s righteous order—life-giving designs—and to teach communities how to act in conformity with that order. Helping the Black Church to embody the truth that “life created in God’s image is meant to confirm other forms of life, into a single harmonious order.”\textsuperscript{156} This behavior brings about a wellness of soul that is sustainable, eternal, and indeed beautiful.

Black Church ecclesial leaders cannot discard the responsibility of first embodying then leading ecological faith toward creation care and strengthening our covenant relationship with God.\textsuperscript{157} I urge them to “let there be no separation between you and the dust of the ground.” I am encouraging the “priests” to take their rightful place (posture) and to lead in this crucial area. While churches generally focus on life through salvation of a person’s soul and with fellowship and the eating of natural food, they are more challenged by the experience of death—and when death occurs, the church is often silent about its (covenantal) responsibility to the environment.\textsuperscript{158} Often, Black churches send families to funeral homes that have historically

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\textsuperscript{155} Davis. Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture, 56.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{157} At the time of publishing, the direct origin of the phrase “ecological faith” could not be gathered. However, I use the phrase, ecological faith, in association with an active display of the embodiment of an ecology theology
\textsuperscript{158} In general, churches need to be more concerned about the environment across all aspects of its ministry, not just in how it approaches death.
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and the impact of those toxins on living bodies and organisms, including the land. The church, then, is negligent in its efforts to help members gain an ecological faith, especially in death. But in death, Black church leaders can embody what it means to be the church in the most life-giving of ways, even in funeral preparation and processing. If this is achieved, Black churches could solidify its partnership in global sustainability and live out the covenantal relationship between God, God’s people, and the land. This would be holy. Indeed, this would be beautiful, and certainly this would be a *glad funeral*.\(^{159}\)

As we turn to the next chapter, we explore green funeral practices in an effort to offer the Black Church a new aesthetic regarding its approach to death as a part of increasing its ecological faith and awareness. Ultimately, my desire is to help Black churches embrace an ecological theology regarding funeral practices and to be better stewards of the earth, strengthen their covenantal relationship, and conduct ministry in the most life-giving of ways, which is indeed beautiful. But what challenges does the Green Funeral pose for Black churches?

Chapter 4: The Green Funeral

Even with its challenges and controversies, North Carolina Black Church funerals are important and should be an enduring practice. I propose that there is a more excellent way for the Black Church to engage families in the preparation of death by connecting the spiritual with the practical to best honor our relationship with God, the earth, and each other. There is a more excellent way for the Black Church to determine how best to incorporate dying into living, to experience death as a part of life, and to reclaim agency—a directness or closeness—in funeral processing. How best do we infuse human experience back into death in the most life-giving of ways? I propose that the Black Church’s participation in greener funeral options as opposed to modern traditional practices gives us the chance to remedy or reconcile our modern disconnection—whether perceived or actual—with death, and much more. I offer an approach to the Black Church funeral, the Green Funeral. Green funerals are one way for Black Christian leaders to embody creation care. By promoting more environmentally friendly funeral practices, Christian leaders can better serve God, God’s people, and the land.

4.1 What Is a Green Funeral?

Suzanne Kelly in *Greening Death* suggests that, in many ways, the green burial is about a return to the past. Native Americans engaged in cremations and natural burials—wrapping the body in a blanket and direct burial. Although impeded by modern cemeteries, Muslim and

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Jewish laws have never totally relinquished natural burial principles and practices. Yet, recent publications regarding green burials acknowledge Ramsey Creek Preserve in Westminster, South Carolina (founded in 1996) as the “first green or natural, burial ground (cemetery) in the United States.”

Lee Webster states that “a green funeral is commonly used to describe post-death care, from death to disposition which uses only natural means. A green burial allows full interment into the ground in a manner that does not inhibit decomposition. This requires use of nontoxic preservation techniques and organic materials with minimal carbon footprints. The three top defining characteristics of any green burial are: absence of vault, non-toxic preparation of the body, and use of containers made of organic materials.” This thesis shows how embracing and encouraging green funerals is a critical contemporary contribution for Black churches to practice a holistic faith that helps to liberate the environment from toxins.

In addition to those descriptors, top reasons why people choose to green death are “1. minimizing impact on the environment, 2. back to old tradition, 3. cost, 4. spiritual or religious reasons; and finally, 5. having a do-it-yourself ethic,” Kelly suggests people who choose to green death aids in restoring our tie to the earth—with closeness; without borders or barriers. The purpose of the green burial is to strengthen our connection and relationship not only to each other

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164 Ibid. These very reasons may also tend to be problematic and/or receive pushback.
but to the environment and to the earth. I extend the purpose of the green burial toward a greater purpose of green funeral with an ultimate strengthened covenant relationship with God.

It matters what we put in the ground. Kelly remembers environmental activist Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold who in the United States gave voice to the harm done to nature and the need for a healthier earth.\textsuperscript{165} In addition, Kelly recalls the 2010 New York Times article that read: “At the end of an eco-conscious life, there is a final choice a person can make to limit his or her impact on the planet: a green funeral.”\textsuperscript{166} As Americans become eco-conscious in life, this consciousness must gain ground even and in all things that include death. The Black church is no different. Is not death a part of living? \textit{Going green} is often thought of as businesses reduce toxins in food, in the air, and the decreasing of other harmful environmental factors associated with everyday living. However, what about in death? The \textit{International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health} illuminates its concern regarding burials and soil contamination, noting that “burial loads have a direct impact on soil-mineral content and thus cemeteries can be regarded as anthropogenic sources of contamination.”\textsuperscript{167} This contamination could possibly come from the deceased body, the wood-casket preservatives, and/or the paints and material for handles used in the appearance or the aesthetics of the casket. Ultimately, this study is concerned with the potential health risks by the leaching of minerals into the groundwater. The Green Burial considers some of the same types of factors in death and burial that one would consider in life.

Kelly upholds The Green Burial Council as the “standard bearer of green burial terrain, identifying and certifying burial grounds.”168 According to The Green Burial Council, “a green, or natural burial is a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat. Green burial necessitates the use of non-toxic and biodegradable materials, such as caskets, shrouds, and urns.”169 The Council (and this thesis) is not labeling any end-of-life ritual as wrong but “advocates for green services and products that help to minimize the environmental impact of last acts.”170

4.1.1 Green Funeral Components

Through the lens of strengthening covenant relationship with God, I extend the general term green funeral meaning “from death to disposition,” as Lee Webster has defined it, toward a new aesthetic in funeral practice for the church. With this theological approach to The Green Funeral, I make space for and invite Black ecclesial leaders to join in this ecological faith movement. From The Green Burial Council (GBC), here are a few elements or considerations to help the Black Church rethink funeral:171

1) Consider biodegradable coffins or the use of shrouds—All GBC approved caskets, urns and shrouds must be constructed from plant-derived, recycled plant-derived, natural, animal, or unfired earthen materials, including shell, liner, and adornments.
2) Stop the use of Vaults—Although vaults are concrete and made from natural materials, the manufacturing of the materials and transporting of vaults uses a tremendous amount

168 Kelly, 86.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
of energy and causes enormous carbon emission. In this US, vault manufacturing requires
the production of 1.6 tons of reinforced concrete. On the other hand, there exists concerns
that surround thinner vaults.

3) Stop Embalming; specifically, the usage of traditional formaldehyde embalming fluid—
Formaldehyde has been shown to cause health issues for the embalmer\textsuperscript{172} and the
possibility of soil contamination. Finally,

4) Rethink Cremations—if sought, at least, use a crematory which considers reduced
emissions

In greening death, I acknowledge the importance meeting of people where they are.
However, I emphasis the criticalness of keeping one’s eye on the larger global sustainability
picture and ultimately on the care of creation.

4.1.2 Green Funeral and Traditional Black Funeral Comparisons and Contrasts

The Green Funeral is an alternative approach to the traditional and toxic Black Church
funeral. In its attempt to further explain and educate the public on green burials, the GBC
recognizes standards (or levels) of cemetery certification: conservation, natural, and hybrid.
Conservation certification—which may broadly take into consideration preservation and
restoration—has the highest level of standards to include a “guarantee preservation of the burial
ground by deed restriction, conservation easement, or other legally binding and irrevocable
agreements that runs with the land and is enforceable in perpetuity;”\textsuperscript{173} an ecological impact

\textsuperscript{172} Journal of the National Cancer Institute (JNCI). Mortality from Lymphohematopoietic Malignancies and Brain
\textsuperscript{173} GBC Cemetery Certification Standards, Accessed November 1, 2021.
https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/our_standards.html
assessment starting with “a property baseline document that includes existing ecological conditions and sensitive area analysis which is updated periodically to assess future property/habitat conditions and plant inventory”\textsuperscript{174}; and the development of a maintenance and operations manual which is used by “all staff, contractors, and volunteers to implement site goals, policies, and best practices.”\textsuperscript{175} A natural burial ground is less restrictive yet must conduct an ecological impact assessment. Then, the least restrictive—hybrid cemeteries—must develop and maintain usage of a maintenance and operations manual. For the larger audience of those considering greening death, there are variations not only between these categories but inside of each category.

I agree with the concept of \textit{levels of greening} because it is indicative of the fact that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that fully encompasses the needs of every family. Greening methods may range from family members washing and wrapping the body in cloth (or a simple wood box) and directly lowering it into the ground, as seen in the Jewish and Muslims cultures; to a sky burial as seen in the Tibetan culture which the dead are “dismembered and left on mountaintops to be feasted upon by vultures.”\textsuperscript{176} If not mountaintop exposure, still, the Western world as an opportunity to experience various degrees of greening with The Green Funeral.

Since funeral rites and rituals are of great importance to Black churches and where funerals, for most spiritual and practical purposes, have been exempt from adaptation and change, what might this reclaiming resemble? Although we might not quite be ready to go back to bathing, dressing, and sheltering the deceased to lie in repose in the front rooms of our homes,

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\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
many Black Church funeral practices have remained unchallenged as profitability in the funeral industry has increased. A Green Funeral may consist of any of these variations:

1. **Green Burial** The direct burial is the depositing of a body into the earth without separation or division of body-to-earth or with the possible usage of biodegradable earth friendly materials. Direct burial is recognized by the GBC as the most natural approach to greening death. It excludes vaults, headstones, and other chemical or non-biodegradable materials. Although in the United States, levels of cremations are rising, “natural burial (green burial) is still considered the most ecologically friendly,” asserts Heidi Hannapel of BlueStem.

2. **Cremation** According to Hannapel, many people think of cremation as an eco-friendly option. Cremation is “the process of reducing the body of the deceased to bone fragments, sodium and calcium phosphate, and ashes by the use of high heat incineration by fire; the creation of an average body uses enough natural gas and electricity to produce 140 lbs. of CO2.” Yet Hannapel argues that natural burial is the most ecological friendly option when it comes to deposing the body. Admittedly, I have known community neighbors who chose cremation because it is a less intrusive quick fix—having the lowest economic impact and is not drawn out, where funeral services or a church is involved. However, one could have a funeral or church services in combination with cremation.

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178 National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) 2021 Cremation & Burial Report, July 2021. By 2040, the US creation rate is projected to reach 78.4% and burial rate 16%.
179 Heidi Hannapel, Zoom Conference Call, August 12, 2021. BlueStem is a conservation cemetery founded in Durham County, NC; located in Orange County, NC. Accessed November 22, 2021 https://www.bluestemcemetery.org/
180 Ibid.
181 However, National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) reports that twenty-eight percent of Americans claims stronger personal faith since COVID-19. In 2020 and 2020, there was an increase in the number of American feeling
Cremation servicing often includes embalming for viewing and then cremation. Yet, there is still a more excellent way in deathcare for cremations. Unlike cremation servicing with embalming, direct cremation involves no ejection of chemicals into the body for viewing purposes where the body goes directly into the crematory for cremation. But is the chosen crematory using the latest or newest machinery? An increased awareness of crematory machinery is recommended inside of greening death to aid in limiting the amount of carbon being placed in the air.

3. Refrigeration The GBC recognizes the use of refrigeration (or ice) for keeping the deceased body at cold temperature and slowing down decomposition. Refrigeration is used instead of embalming. Unlike embalming, the usage of refrigeration requires the funeral directors to have the means to cool the body and to deposit the body in a quicker fashion. Cremation Association of America (CANA) asserts that “families should be provided with the option to [formally] view their loved one even if they don’t want embalming.” Refrigeration could be a key practice for viewing the body for either cremation or burial.

4. Human Composting (Recompose) In the United States, human composting, or natural organic reduction (recompose) is gaining traction. Located outside of Seattle, the Recompose company is turning dead bodies into soil. Unlike cremation, no fire, carbon nitrogen, heat, water, or oxygen

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religion is a very important component in a funeral per the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) 2021 Cremation & Burial Report, July 2021.

is used. Recomposing -placing the body in a cradle with wood chips, alfalfa and straw- takes two weeks to a month and generally cost $5,500 per person. Other states are looking into being able to claim recomposing in their area.\textsuperscript{183}

5. \textit{Human Aquamation (Resomation)} E. Keijzer in “Environmental impact of different funeral technologies” concludes that resomation has the least impact on the environment than traditional burial and cremation.\textsuperscript{184} Unlike recomposing, the alkaline hydrolysis process uses natural elements of 95\% water (heated), 5\% an alkali solution of potassium hydroxide (KOH), and sodium to breakdown the deceased body to bones. In addition to aquamation being used in the disposal of bodies donated to science, aquamation “only uses 10\% of the energy of a traditional cremation and produces no air emissions like traditional cremations.”\textsuperscript{185} Clay-Barnette Funeral Home and Aquamation Center, the first funeral home in the North Carolina to provide the process of alkaline hydrolysis or human aquamation, advertises that “while most charge on average $2,200-$3,500 for cremation, our local aquamation charge starts at $1,995.”\textsuperscript{186} Recently, the process of aquamation made headline news with the death and ecological funeral of anti-apartheid leader and Anglican archbishop emeritus Bishop Desmond Tutu. As a sign of being a champion for the environment, during the funeral, Bishop Tutu’s body rested in a simple pine

\textsuperscript{183} Human Composting https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/other_disposition_options.html Accessed October 19, 2021; and, Recompose https://recompose.life/ Accessed October 19, 2021
coffin; thereafter, entered the aquamation process then interred at St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town.” Bishop Tutu’s actions in and after death serve as examples worthy to of us to follow.

6. A Hybrid Approach As stated above, there are levels of awareness and/or involvement in greening death, through managing the deceased body and the related funeral practices. The ecclesial leader can become part of the greening death movement. Doing so will help equip the leaders to lead families to consider greening death prior to and during the process of dying and make this pastoral leadership more credible. For leaders to take this step, I present possible opportunities for the Black Church to build ecological-faith throughout the entirety of one’s life. I show how an ecological theological framework leads families to honor the dead more nobly through practicing responsible financial and environmental stewardship.

With the onset of new deathcare trends the GBC is challenged as to which process to endorse and is in the process of having further discussions regarding better ecological death processing. Unlike traditional or mainstream offerings, a hybrid approach to deathcare displays a heightened awareness of global sustainability efforts and allows the family to incorporate unique levels, minimum or maximum, based on comfort level, availability, and accessibility. Yet, an effort has been made and/or consideration has been given towards the greater efforts of greening. For some, a hybrid approach may be considered as a middle ground or a step toward

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188 Green Burial Council https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/other_disposition_options.html Accessed October 19, 2021. Diversification in the management of the deceased body and other methods for greening death are known yet maybe not currently be officially promoted by the GBC. Other diverse methodologies/notable mentions are: promession or cryomation-freezing the body, the mushroom suit, and capsula mundi
greening death and/or obtaining a level of ecological faith, even in death, instead of none or
making no advance at all.

4.2 The Green Funeral Is A Response To Environmentalism, Environmental Theology, and Creation Care

The Green Funeral is a response to environmentalism, environmental theology, and creation care, helping to bridge gaps between science and spirituality. Merriam-Webster defines environmentalism as “advocacy of the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment.”¹⁸⁹ John Hart in What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology? extends this definition of environmentalism toward God. Hart offers an environmental theology that is concerned with “the intrinsic value of all creatures and earth, responsibility of the usage of earth’s resources a sense of intergenerational responsibility and a heightened consciousness of the immanence of the Creator in creation.”¹⁹⁰ Douglas Moo in Creation Care describes creation care as “our ethical responsibility for the non-human world.”¹⁹¹ Moo proclaims that creation care speaks to more than the care for creation but connotes a view of creation that grounds our care in how we think about creation that will govern how we care for it. Then, the Lausanne Movement simply states creation care this way: the stewardship of God’s creation.¹⁹² The Green Funeral is not only a response to environmentalism, environmental theology, and creation care but promotes ecological faith.

¹⁹¹ Douglas Moo, Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World, Zondervan Academic 2018, 24
4.3 The Green Funeral Promotes Ecological Faith in Black Church Traditions

As the Black Church looks for creative ways to embody ecological faith, the Green Funeral is an excellent way to engage.

4.3.1 The Advancement of Ecological Faith

In 1869, German philosopher Earnst Haeckel coined the term ecology. Ecology comes from the Greek word Oikos meaning “household” and logos meaning “study of,” therefore the “study of nature’s household”. “Relating this definition to science, ecology becomes the study of the management of the natural environment which includes the relations of organisms with one another and to their surroundings.”

When combined with faith, ecology takes on a spiritual perspective. From this, we obtain an understanding of ecological faith that is rooted in the Creator, creation, and a hope for all living things.

The Green Funeral promotes ecological faith in Black Church traditions. Members of the Black Church community, like The Green Church, embody ecological faith. The Green Church is a Black Church community that seeks the advancement of ecological faith by creating ecological pathways for ecclesial leaders to thrive in the face of societal and personal challenges. Per its website, The Green Church identifies itself as “the Environmental Organization of the Black Church” which stands at the intersection of the Black Church and the environmental movement. It speaks of green theology that emphasis the duty of Christians to protect God’s creation.

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Otis Moss III who extends the argument towards liberation. Like James Cone in “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” and Dianne Glave in “Black Environmental Liberation Theology”, Moss proclaims that care of the land is intimately tied to Black liberation.195 From a green rooftop to improving eating habits, Trinity seeks to free its congregation and community from the economic, social, and environmental woes by putting their hands in the same soil and engaging in multigenerational environmental projects. 196

4.3.2 Ecological Faith and The Green Funeral

Ecological faith is meaningful and of value to Black Church funeral traditions. Embodying ecological faith through green funeral practices demonstrates an expanded view of covenant that not only includes the created order but emphasizes that if covenant is with God, then humanity has a responsibility to steward in a way that honors covenant. Therefore, Davis in Getting Involved with God proclaims that reverence for the earth and reverence for God cannot be separated. The Green Funeral concept acknowledges what Davis calls the “fragile beauty of the fertile earth that constitutes an ongoing call to responsibility, and for many of us, repentance and a change of life.”197 I extend this argument to a call to holiness. Davis in Scripture, Culture,

196 The National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program, Washington, DC www.nccecojustice.org
and Agriculture states the prophet Isaiah leads us to apply ourselves to the telling diagnosis of “they have violated an everlasting covenant” through our abuse of creation. The Green Funeral concept acknowledges this fact and helps to strengthen our covenant with God.

4.3.3 The Green Funeral and The Black Church Funeral Tradition

The Green Funeral takes honoring covenant and the Black Church funeral seriously and to a next level. With The Green Funeral, the Black Church ecclesial leader takes responsibility and is accountable for all of creation and to God. Green funerals provide families as well as the Black Church with rich, meaningful healing while furthering legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving native habitat. The Black Church has a responsibility to act, to remember what God remembers, and to love what God loves. God loves the land. Embodying ecological faith says that the Black Church is a good steward, remembering what God remembers; and that the Black Church has a heart for what God has a heart for, loving what God loves.

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198 Ellen Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 19. Isaiah 24:5 “The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.”
Chapter 5: The Conclusion

5.1 At The End of The Day

As stated previously, as a minister of the gospel, a director of bereavement, and a chaplain within a healthcare system, I have been called to the bedside of those who are reported to be actively dying. Actively dying signifies the final stage of dying where the patient is expected to die within a matter of hours or days, usually within three days. This could be considered an application of at the end of a day—when the mortal or temporal body is at end of life. At the end of the day, what matters to the Black Church? Dean David Goatley asserts that “what we do, implicitly or explicitly, affects all around us; to include the care or corruption of creation.”\(^\text{199}\) Like John in Revelation, Goatley asserts, there is more to see than what is seen with the ordinary or nature eye. Davis in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* suggests that there is a way of seeing that is bifocal—having the near sight on what is imminent then a long-term vision of the day of the Lord, the day of reckoning.\(^\text{200}\) Goatley would suggest in preparation for the end of the day it is advantageous for the Black Church to “seek discipline and discernment and to faithfully follow the will of God as we await the return of Christ Jesus.”\(^\text{201}\) The embodiment of an ecological theology through creation care is what a proactive wait resembles, what Dean Gregory Jones would consider as “pushing-off from our tiptoes and not reacting from our

\(^{199}\) Dean David E. Goatley, Goodson Chapel Service November 16, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wz6L4rcWxa0
\(^{200}\) Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture, 14.
heels.” The Green Funeral is an alternative to the toxic traditional funeral practices that invites the Black Church to push-off from our tiptoes and not react from our heels because the end of the day is nearing. This thesis sought to raise the consciousness of Black churches around environmental theology that will result in discouraging toxic burial practices and embracing the environmentally friendly practice of green funerals.

At death, Americans frequently want to distance themselves from the natural process of decomposition. With little thought of what is going in the soil, we often pollute the land and therefore hurt or harm the very thing that God loves and gives to us for our flourishing. The land supports and feeds us, and we are called to be in a covenantal relationship with it: yet so often we are not. For example, we bury our dead in chemicals, unnecessarily embalming the bodies of our loved ones, and we place them in manufactured products, caskets also chemically treated. Certainly, we must consider the laws and legislation governing funeral practices. But might there be a larger story that is missed when we approach death and our relationship to the land? Despite the well-known Scripture, “you are dust, and to dust and to dust you shall return,” Christians often fail to embrace the fullness of natural burials as we return to the land.

I made my case by leaning heavily on Leviticus to identify covenantal relationship and through obedience, help strengthen Black Church covenantal loyalty. Leviticus 26:40-46 says, “then I will remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.” I iterated the blessings for creation—land and people with rain, harvests, and fertility. With obedience to God’s statues and laws, Leviticus 26 says “I will give you peace throughout the land, so that you will lie down with none to make to make you tremble” (Leviticus 26:6; Everett Fox translation). I used Leviticus

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26:19-20 to suggest what disobedience would resemble and how might the Black Church sow its seed in vain. I translated disobedience into such practices as burying money in fancy coffins, injecting dead bodies with toxic chemicals, and emitting harmful pollutants into the air with cremations. I posed that all these poisonous burial practices make “earth like copper” and infertile lands. I shared that Leviticus teaches to not defile but to be clean and holy “for I the Lord your God am holy.” (19:2)

I offered two lenses through which to examine the Black Church’s care of creation: covenantal relationship and beauty. Through these, I displayed how covenantal commitments and aesthetic concerns hold up when they are placed into conversation with creation theology, environmentalism, and the current practices of the funeral industry, and how these values end up distorted by harmful church practices that do not honor creation. I hope to help the Black Church see differently, especially as concern for covenantal relationships and recognizing and celebrating the beauty of the world are already important to the church. As we return to dust, Black Church congregants can be educated and directed toward funeral options that uplift the foundational principle of covenantal relationship that has the potential to guide us toward caring ecological practices. As thinking Christian leaders, we must become more aware of how we attend to our dead and return them to the ground in the most life-giving of ways.

In essence, my research investigates the incorporation of green burial practices into the Black Church funeral. I explored how changing aesthetics among funeral practices in the Black Church might enable more faithful stewardship of God’s creation in order to provide a blueprint for churches’ bereavement practices that better witness to our commitment to our covenant with God in terms of how we use the gifts of creation that God has so graciously given.
Although I come to this project as a Black Church member and with my own experience, my approach is informed by and weighs heavily on historical work and current literature. I built upon that work and entered conversation with theologians and those in the funeral industry and the green burial fields to help make the claim and in support of this thesis/my presentation to the Black Church. This thesis aims to raise the consciousness of Black churches around environmental theology that will result in discouraging toxic burial practices and embracing the environmentally friend practice of green funerals by answering fundamental questions of:

1. How might more attention to environmentalism help Black churches, ecclesial leaders and communities to understand better the toxic impact of traditional funeral practices on creation?
2. How might increased attention to environmental theology help Black churches and ecclesial leaders to better seek alternatives to environmental degradation from traditional funeral practices?
3. How might better attention to environmentalism cause churches to reconsider all their material practices so that they might seek to embody holiness and promote beauty relative to creation in all that they do?

5.2 A Call to Stay Woke

Kelly in *Greening Death* acknowledges “that people to waking up to a deeper yearning—a hunger for more meaningful death practices.” I extend this invitation to the Black Church inside of its funeral practices. Theologian James Cone, author of *God of the Oppressed* states “theology should not put us to sleep, but should wake us up!  

So, WAKE UP! Do not die, get

to higher ground! “Every round goes higher and higher!” RISE, for it is critical that you keep moving forward by seeing yourself in a forward-moving state. People are depending on you! WAKE UP, get moving, and come to the table of conversation.” As leaders, it is necessary for the Black Church to find its collective voice on the topics of local and global issues while holding together the tension without damaging its own.

Is this a tall task? Even so, how might the Black Church do this? However painful, the Black Church is obligated to “always be opened and oriented toward freedom,”205 Marbury in Pillars of Cloud and Fire tells us. Expounding on Exodus 13:21-22, “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people,” Marbury gives space for the cloud symbol to be subtle and quiet in movement, where appropriate and legitimated by civil society and not as a hiding space to invoke more hurt and pain. In contrast, Marbury interprets the fire as “the symbol invoking a radical challenge to the social and political fabrics of our time.

Although the respective beacons of cloud and fire appeared in vastly different forms, they both led the Children of Israel in the same direction, from slavery toward the Promise Land, and were necessary components of a liberation project.”206 It is not optional for the Black Church to lack in its efforts to exhibit ecological faith. At conception, the Black Church challenged the social and political order of its time. Today, in like fashion, the community needs leaders to include clergy, to lead being the “pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.” At the end of the day, there is a call for the Black Church stay woke and to lead through pandemics toward

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life in the most life-giving ways, even in death.

5.3 **Meeting Contemporary Challenges**

Green Funerals are essential to the practices of Black churches as we continue to meet contemporary challenges. However, Green Funerals are not in isolation to other aspects of ministry that help families prepare for the dying aspect of living and honoring God in these critical phases. But Green Funerals fit within a continuum of conversations critical for the Black Church to engage. For example, there is an African American Advanced Planning network that is coordinated by Dr. Patrick Smith and Maria Mugweru. See Advance Care Planning and Healthy Living Through Faith at https://tmc.divinity.duke.edu/advance-care-planning-and-healthy-living-through-faith/

Additionally, technology raises new questions about artificially extending “life” through technology and the right to die with dignity. See Activism and End of Life Choice (April) - The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University at https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/activism-and-end-of-life-choice/.

With a renewed commitment to environmental theology, the Black Church will be posed to meet and exceed the challenges that are presented in this dissertation.
Appendix

Since the care of creation is the responsibility of all Christians, the Black Church desires to take its responsibilities seriously. The Black Church would benefit greatly from further research around religion and ecology, and the work, practices, and commitments of its leaders. The rituals of the Black Church related to death—funerals, memorials, and burial practices—offer opportunities for such fulfillment. I offer a few lingering questions for consideration and continued research:

1. How does the Black Church best work with land trusts and owners to secure property for green burials inside and outside of the Black community?
2. To what extent does ecological sensibilities in African traditional religious thought inform Black Christian thought?
3. Did enslaved people's farming practices and the anticipation of "40 acres and a mule" have theological as well as economic implications?
4. How might emotional attachment to "home" related to church and/or places of birth or nurture have theological content to inform ecological theology?
5. As leaders, how do we faithfully bear witness to such suffering and evoke the eco-theological imagination of persons in our ministry settings?
   5a. How can we shape and form the Word such that we are faithful to what all of our writings indicating that we are not simply responsible to and for creation, but part thereof (oneness, in community with, etc.)?
   5b. In what ways can we guard against our own leadership tendencies to overconsume in our efforts to produce?
6. Are we as humanity capable of doing no harm?
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Biography

Sequola Collins, PhD, DMIN serves as director of bereavement at Russell Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Durham, North Carolina. A former member of the Board of Directors of the Green Burial Council (GBC), Collins holds doctoral degrees from Payne Theological Seminary and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical (A&T) State University. She is the author of several works to include “Green funerals are one way for Christian leaders to promote creation care”; “Black Churches and Green Funerals: How green funeral and burial practices can be part of the Black Church tradition, aesthetics, and sensitivity to ecological justice”; and *The Glad Funeral*. Collins enjoys the theatre with her daughter, Destiny.