Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

[ISSN 2958-1052]
Volume: 05 Issue: 01 | October-2026

JHSS

The Influence of Environmental Teachings On Adventists' Understanding of the Environmental Crisis in Central Rift Valley Conference, Kenya

Authors

Charles Nyandiri Ondicho [1]; Dickson Nkonge Kagema [2]; Caroline Mucece Kithinji [3]

Main author's email: ondicha80@gmail.com

(1.2.3) Chuka University, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA

Ondicho, C. N., Kagema, D. N., & Kithinji, C. M. (2026). The influence of environmental teachings on Adventists' understanding of the environmental crisis in Central Rift Valley Conference, Kenya. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5 (1), 116-137. https://doi.org/10.51317/qm8nq518

OPEN ACCESS

A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2026-08-13
Accepted: 2026-09-18
Published: 2026-10-28

Scan this QR to read the paper online

Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Abstract

This study aimed to assess the impact of Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) environmental teachings on Adventists' perception of the environmental crisis in the Central Rift Valley Conference (CRVC), Kenya, where there are diminishing lakes, deforestation in the Mau Forest Complex, soil erosion and water scarcity. Environmental degradation has continued to pose threats both to ecosystems and human livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa, but the role of religious environmental teachings in influencing the awareness and reaction of the believers to ecological crises is still little explored empirically. The study used a convergent mixed-methods design guided by Structural Functionalism Theory and Parsons' AGIL schema. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 pastors, 19 stewardship leaders, and 19 district elders selected through cluster, stratified, and purposive sampling. Thematic analysis yielded three types of environmental awareness: experiential, theological, and eco-justice, and understanding focused amongst pastors, and was often superficial amongst elders and stewardship leaders. The Church teachings had some influence, but this was limited due to lack of contextualisation. The official statement on the environment was not well communicated, and there were also irregular transmission mechanisms. The eschatological concept served as a two-sided sword: eschatology with a sense of responsibility led to stewardship, and eschatology with a sense of fatalism led to passivity. The study found that the Church's stewardship doctrine is generally accepted, but ecologically ineffective in practice, and that there is a policy-praxis gap. It suggested a contextually theological-ecological pedagogy, a responsible eschatological approach to teaching, organised stewardship strategies, and specific environmental education for church leaders to put theology into practice.

Key terms: Adventist, creation care, environmental crisis, environmental stewardship, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues are one of the most pressing existential challenges of the twenty-first century, but Christian churches that have a doctrine of creation care demonstrate a concerning disconnect between their official stance and members' environmental awareness and concerns. It is a fundamental question whether and how the Church's environmental teaching becomes the consciousness of the church and the actions of the believers, in a reality characterised by acute environmental crisis. This crisis is characterised by increased land degradation, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and atmospheric pollution worldwide. The main drivers of this degradation are recognised to be human activities, including deforestation, unsustainable agriculture, industrial emissions and uncontrolled disposal of waste (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021). It is not only an ecological crisis but also an economic, social, moral and spiritual crisis because of the impact on the living standards, health and dignity of current and future generations.

At the macro level, the local environmental crisis/conflict is a reflection of a cumulative global crisis. The degradation of the environment is always reported to have reached unprecedented levels, and many planetary systems are moving towards irreversible tipping points (IPCC, 2023; Richardson et al., 2023). Global surface temperatures are increasing, the extinction rate of species is high, land degradation is increasing, and high pollutant concentrations in the atmosphere and ocean are part of the global ecological crisis (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2024; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2024, 2025). The extraction of resources is unsustainable, and linear production-consumption cycles and industrial emissions are continuing to be disruptive to the global weather system, threatening vulnerable human communities, planetary stability and global food security (IPCC, 2023; World Resources Institute [WRI], 2024). The global trend is a systemic issue that is not confined to any single scenario, but extends to all of humanity's undertakings and requires immediate moral, structural and institutional solutions to restore and repurpose ecosystems across all parts of the world (IPBES, 2024; UNEP, 2024).

This burden is disproportionately shared by sub-Saharan countries, especially those with low emissions such as Kenya, which experience large ecological shocks. Food insecurity, late and irregular rainfall patterns, and soil degradation have been identified as deteriorating in the region over the past few years, culminating in heightened food insecurity, displacement of the local population, and resource-driven conflict in the region. (Government of Kenya, 2024; Ministry of Health, 2024). The Rift Valley region of Kenya is a case in point of this crisis in all its starkness. Lake Nakuru and Lake Naivasha are also constantly plagued by hydrological fluctuations, sedimentation and nutrient pollution from intensive agricultural run-off, commercial flower farm discharges and water abstraction without monitoring (Citizen Digital, 2025; Lake Nakuru National Park, 2025). In addition to this, there is ongoing encroachment of agriculture and deforestation within the Mau Forest Complex, which is a strategic water tower for the region, yielding direct impacts on water security in areas downstream of the forest (Kiema et al., 2025; Mau Forest Complex Programme, 2026), while also continuing to cause soil erosion. The pressures are happening at a time of high population growth, intensive farming and urban sprawl, which are already putting immense stress on delicate ecological systems (Government of Kenya, 2024).

It has long been acknowledged that human attitudes and behaviours such as individuals' and communities' orientations toward the natural world are shaped by religion (Kanu, 2022; Shehu, 2023). As religious institutions, they have a significant moral voice, a large social following and frequent teaching opportunities that enable them to influence the moral frame of mind around the environment and encourage eco-consciousness (Kathambi et al., 2024; Marshall & Heather, 2024). The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church takes pride in its unique theological foundations, such as the creation theology that values the Sabbath as a day of God's creation, and the stewardship theology which teaches that humanity is responsible to Him as stewards and not owners of the planet (Dinah, 2025; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2024). Christian stewardship continues

to be lived out practically in the context of various church practices in relation to sustainable living and in relation to active care of creation (General Conference of SDAs, 2020).

This is a socio-ecological paradox that emerges in the Central Rift Valley Conference (CRVC), an administrative unit with its headquarters in Nakuru and a membership of more than 45,000 baptised members in 75 districts. Although the church has been growing rapidly and has a formal institutional commitment to creation stewardship (SDA Church, 1996), the region's ecosystems remain highly degraded by anthropogenic activities. Existing literature on "faith-based" environmentalism shows that it is not enough to simply have a normatively religious teaching to have an eco-critical consciousness or to change behaviour, but rather the operationalisation of the theology is dependent on how the teaching is contextualised, institutionalised and pedagogised (Haluza-DeLay, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016).

Based on the African Oikotheology principle, Kagema (2016) contends that the churches in sub-Saharan countries have to break away from the abstract Western ecological approaches and develop an ecclesial practice that is directly inspired by the socio-environmental context. In the CRVC, where the congregants directly witness the reduction of hydrological bodies, degraded soils, and forest loss, the question that needs to be asked is whether the official creation doctrines have been localised to enable a genuine eco-theological awareness, or whether they are doctrinally accepted and ecologically powerless.

A critical review of the literature on religion and ecology in East Africa shows that although there is a wealth of theoretical work on eco-theology and the socio-environmental impacts of religion in Kenya, systematic empirical studies on how Adventist lay members and clergy internalise, perceive and respond to environmental crises are still far from being found in the current peer-reviewed literature. If environmental awareness is superficial, fragmented or even swamped by competing eschatological discourses, then the Church's institutional capacity for environmental mobilisation is latent. This identified gap in empirical scholarship is addressed by examining the level of environmental awareness among SDA members and leaders in the CRVC and the impact of the teachings of the denomination on their perceptions. Where awareness is limited or misguided, the institutional ability of the Church to mobilise for the environment is dormant, and the stewardship doctrine is likely to be accepted, but not implemented. It is against this backdrop that this study was carried out to examine how the environmental teachings of the SDA Church influence members' understanding of the environmental crisis in the CRVC. This study endeavoured to answer the following research questions: (i) What do SDA members and leaders view as the environmental crisis in the CRVC, and how do they perceive it, both in terms of its severity and its causes? (ii) To what extent do the Church's environmental teachings influence this perception? (iii) Which theological interpretations enable or hinder this perception?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christian Understanding of Environmental Crisis

A critical synthesis of scholarship on religion and ecology in East Africa shows that there is a substantive empirical gap: while there are many theoretical models of eco-theology and of the socio-environmental impacts of religion in Kenya, there is a significant lack of systematic empirical assessments of how Adventist lay members and Adventist clergy internalise, perceive, and respond to environmental crises in Kenya. The Church's institutional capacity for environmental mobilisation is latent in the face of superficial, fragmented, or competing eschatological frameworks of environmental consciousness. In response to this identified gap in empirical research, this study examines the level of environmental awareness of SDA members and leaders in the CRVC and explores how much this awareness is shaped by the teachings of the denomination. Where awareness is shallow or misguided, the institutional capacity of the Church for environmental mobilisation is dormant, and its stewardship doctrine is likely to be received but not put into practice. This study was conducted in this context to investigate the impact of the environmental teachings of the SDA Church on the environmental understanding of its members in the CRVC.

Conceptualising the Environmental Crisis: Anthropogenic Drivers, Socio-Ecological Dynamics, and Lived Realities

The state of the research on the global environmental crisis is overwhelming, with the crisis viewed as a multi-dimensional, systemic emergency, involving irreversible ecological changes, such as intensified land degradation, biodiversity loss, high levels of water scarcity, atmospheric pollution and climate volatility (Fletcher et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2023; Ripple et al., 2025). In contrast to the more traditional biophysical models, modern environmental sociology and eco-theology use a socio-ecological interdependency model. This outlook highlights the mutual influence and intertwining of ecological pressures and human activities, global markets, much faster population growth, and unsustainable agriculture and linear industrial consumption (IPCC, 2023; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] 2024; World Resources Institute [WRI] 2024).

There is, however, a critical epistemological conflict in the literature on the understanding of the environmental crisis on various scales. International scientific organisations (IPCC, 2023; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2024; UNEP, 2024, 2025) create macro-level synthesis reports, which use complex, quantitative and global indicators of environmental severity, including carbon dioxide equivalencies, planetary boundary overshoots and species extinction rates. These macro-frameworks are scientifically sound but do not necessarily reflect localised and experiential realities in communities in the Global South. The environmental crisis is not just a global prediction in sub-Saharan Africa, but a reality in the lives of people in rural and peri-urban Kenya. Local communities evaluate ecological breakdown by directly experiencing the local environment: fewer crops, drying riverbeds, flooding in a few months of the year, localised soil erosion, deforestation, plastic pollution, and no rain in a few months of the year (Vasconcelos & Neto, 2024).

The gap between what science says and what is actually felt is significant for environmental mobilisation. Ives et al. (2024) and Stacey (2024) state that scientific, technical, and managerial solutions to the protection of the environment are not enough since they do not have the moral urgency to change human behaviour. Scientific knowledge has a limited impact on changing deeply entrenched cultural norms, ethical systems, and values. Rather, as far as the anthropogenic environmental crisis is concerned, it is necessary to appeal to the basic belief systems, moral identities, and religious worldviews of people (Bhagwat et al., 2024; Getui, 1993; Stacey, 2024). In countries such as Kenya, where Christianity is so entrenched in social, political, and daily life, it is important to first understand how environmental crises are defined, moralised, and interpreted by faith in order to take meaningful action on ecological issues.

Christian Theology of Creation and Biblical Stewardship

Theology of Creation and Biblical Stewardship is a Christian thing. Theological and scriptural traditions have much to offer to the conceptualisation of ecological responsibility, with the primary focus being the theology of creation care and God's stewardship (Bauckham, 2010; Bouma-Prediger, 2023). Classic and contemporary biblical scholarship refutes historical critiques such as the now-famous thesis of Lynn White (1967) that Judeo-Christian theology is pro-environmental exploitation, by demonstrating that biblical stories position humanity in the created world, rather than above or beyond it (Bauckham, 2010; Spencer, 2023). Humans have a common, creaturely nature with the natural world and a divine calling to care for them in a loving and protective manner (Bauckham, 2010; Bouma-Prediger, 2023).

Eco-theology is not a 'bonus' or an extra add-on to Christian discipleship in today's context. Instead, it is a part of it; it is a manifestation of love for the Creator and love for the neighbour (Bouma-Prediger, 2023; Bratton, 2024; Spencer, 2023). This destruction of ecosystems, pollution of water sources and degradation of agricultural land is therefore considered a moral violation and sin towards God and future generations (Bouma-Prediger, 2023). In addition, Spencer (2023) states that, while there are fears about what will happen next with respect to climate change, Christian stewardship of the environment is not a bet on the future, but rather a morally obligatory and risk-averse investment.

The Seventh-day Adventist Teaching and Theological Understanding of the Environmental Crisis

The SDA Church has a distinctive doctrinal basis and organisational structure for environmental stewardship within the larger framework of Christian eco-theology. The creation theology of SDA is not just a social commitment; it is also embedded in the denomination's core doctrines, prophetic identity, and health principles (Dinah, 2025; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2024; SDA Church, 1996).

The Sabbath doctrine serves as the basis of Adventist eco-theology and a weekly reminder of a literal creation that requires rest for people, animals, and the earth, and of God's boundaries on economic exploitation and environmental depletion (Dinah, 2025; General Conference of SDAs, 2024). In addition to the Sabbath, there are a number of interrelated theological foundations that support Seventh-day Adventism's commitment to creation care. It is formally stated in the 21st Fundamental Belief of the SDA Church, which states that believers are stewards who are held accountable to God for the proper care and use of the earth's natural resources (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2020). This responsibility is set in the context of the Great Controversy, which sees the degradation, pollution, and exploitation of nature as tragic results of sin and Satanic interference in God's original and perfect design (White, 1911). The Adventist theology of Salvation and Redemption, therefore, goes beyond the deliverance of the individual to the re-creation of creation. The work of Christ in saving the world by dying at Calvary is the catalyst for a moral change in the lives of believers, leading to living in harmony with the principles of heaven, with the expectation that the earth will be re-created and restored to its former glory in the future (General Conference of SDAs, 2024). The Adventist health message is supported by the writings of Ellen G. White, who viewed nature as the "second book of divine revelation" (White, 1905); the prophetic message of the Three Angels' Messages to worship the Creator (Revelation 14:7); and official Adventist policy statements in the church (SDA Church, 1996). As believers, these teachings remind us that we are not owners, but stewards of God's creation.

The writings of Ellen G. White, one of the church's co-founders, also contribute to Adventist environmental understanding, as her theological perspective highlights a holistic relationship among spiritual health, physical health, and reverence for the natural environment. White reiterated that nature is a reflection of God's character, and a second book of divine revelation. She warned against the cruel treatment of animals, land exploitation, and urban pollution. In her early publications on health and education, White emphasised country living, ecological farming methods, clean living, and temperance, and viewed caring for the environment as a holy calling that is directly linked to human dignity and spiritual development (General Conference of SDAs, 2020; Dinah, 2025).

At the institutional level, the General Conference of SDAs has issued clear policy statements on the Seventh-day Adventist position on environmental degradation. The SDA Church officially stated in the Statement on the Environment adopted in 1996 that the crisis of the global environment is directly caused by human greed, selfishness, and neglect of stewardship (SDA Church, 1996). The call urges Adventist members to live simple, sustainable lives, participate in community-level conservation, and speak out for ecological protection as a way to fulfil their Christian responsibilities.

Furthermore, Adventist theologians link creation care to the apocalyptic Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14:6–12. The message of the First Angel gives the human race the command to worship the Creator of heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water (Revelation 14:7). In Adventist eschatological teachings, this prophetic message to honour the Creator also implicitly implies an ethical responsibility for the care of the created world; it is a clear condemnation of human activities that harm the Earth (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2024). But a careful examination of Adventist literature shows that there has been an overemphasis on normative top-down institutional statements. Theological publications and documents of General Conference logically explain what Adventists should believe, but they rarely provide empirical field data to determine whether these official doctrines are actually understood, preached, or practised by the local church

members and clergy in environmentally distressed areas.

Comparative Analysis: The Gap between Doctrine, Awareness and Action

A consistent finding in the empirical literature, locally, regionally, and globally, is that formal religious doctrine, member awareness, and environmental action do not always align (Codjoe et al., 2024; Haluza-DeLay, 2014; Ives et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2016). The systematic study of scholars over the years shows that an official doctrine of creation care does not automatically lead to eco-critical consciousness or sustainable behaviours among believers.

Comparative information is available from recent empirical studies, which can be evaluated to gain information about this disconnect. Ives et al. (2024) studied the behavioural reactions of Christians who read church-produced sustainability literature around the world. They found that the religious framing of the literature was a more reliable predictor of environmental behavioural intentions among people who were already environmentally concerned. However, religious identification was not a consistent predictor of either general environmental concern or lifestyle changes. The disconnect between doctrine and action is even more pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are competing socioeconomic priorities. To study the relationship between intrinsic religious conviction, scientific knowledge and climate action, Codjoe et al. (2024) conducted a study in southern Ghana. They found a great divide: deep intrinsic religious belief led to one's acceptance of the reality of climate change, but not to personal or community mitigation actions. Rather, scientific literacy and knowledge of the actual cause-and-effect relationships were the primary drivers of active environmental stewardship (Codjoe et al., 2024). This is a demonstration that it is not enough to have a religious belief system; one has to know the actual processes and consequences of localised ecological crisis to take action.

In the *African Theological Journal for Church and Society,* Togarasei (2023) argues that the concept of earth-care is supposed to be inherent and embedded in African Christian life, but it is not as is found in practice in the field. Togarasei (2023) also demonstrates that in many cases the daily environmental practices of African Christians do not directly result from formal church teachings but rather from the local land tenure system, their survival needs, and socio-cultural practices. Likewise, in an empirical study of Christian eco-theologies and urban green spaces in Yorubaland, Nigeria, Adedeji and Lenz (2024) found that the personal theological attitude of the local pastor was the sole determinant of the congregation's involvement in environmental conservation. In denominations with explicit, written policy statements on eco-theology, local churches with leaders with no environmental awareness demonstrated no active involvement in conservation efforts.

A structural misalignment is often experienced in sub-Saharan churches, in which abstract, Western theology is taught, and which does not reflect the lived ecological and social realities of its members; in this instance, the theology taught is a Western concept, African Oikotheology, which was conceptualised by Kagema (2016). Churches have a tremendous potential for moral action in the environmental arena, but that potential is not realised until their doctrines are purposefully decentered, organised, and taught in the context of local church life (Haluza-DeLay, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016).

Theological Impediments: Adventist Eschatology as a Double-Edged Sword

One of the most influential theological determinants of Christian environmental attitudes is the theology of end times or eschatology (Nche, 2020a; 2022; Falconer, 2019; Nche, 2020). How eschatology is taught and understood in local churches will have a direct impact on whether believers see environmental degradation as a crisis that demands immediate action or as a sign of God's judgment that is divinely directed. Eschatology is a theological double-edged sword in Seventh-day Adventist theology.

Popular Christian discourse, on the other hand, has been shown in various studies in sub-Saharan Africa to have a fatalistic eschatology, which imagines the full physical destruction of the world by fire before the new heaven and new earth (Nche, 2020a; 2022; Falconer, 2019; Nche, 2020). Nche (2020a) and Nche (2020) analysed the Christian discourse and reported

that the localised ecological shocks, like severe droughts, erratic rainfall, deforestation, and crop failures, were often perceived by the ordinary members of the congregation and the clergy as fulfilled apocalyptic prophetic signs of the end of the age, and not as socio-environmental problems that need practical mitigation. In Adventist circles, an excessive focus on the imminent destruction of the physical earth can result in a fatalistic apocalyptic attitude: if the world is coming to an end at the Second Coming, then environmental protection and conservation work are insignificant or unimportant. This doomsday interpretation can result in a passive attitude of acquiescence, and takes away the practical power from the Adventist teaching of stewardship.

In contrast, however, those who do not interpret Scripture fatalistically, such as the eco-theological scholars Falconer (2019) and Bauckham (2010), argue that the annihilationist interpretation of Scripture is a basic theological distortion. Restorationist theologians draw on biblical texts of cosmic redemption to claim that real Christian eschatology promises not the total annihilation of the existing created order, but its renewal, cleansing, and restoration. When Scripture is properly understood in the context of a theology of cosmic renewal, caring for the environment becomes an important prophetic expression and a cooperative response to God's continuing redemptive action. Believers are called to love and care for a created world that is ultimately worth saving (Falconer, 2019). Eschatology can be a tool for local conference Adventists to engage in urgent creation care, or a theological basis for environmental irresponsibility and apathy. Eschatology can be a powerful motivator for local conference Adventists to take action for creation care, or a theological justification for environmental irresponsibility and apathy.

Educating for Religious Leadership as the Mediating Institutional Pivot

Religious leaders have been identified in a large body of current research as the missing link between policy and practice, as they are the pastors, district elders and stewardship directors (Adedeji & Lenz, 2024; Nche, 2020; Scott et al., 2025). The leaders of churches serve as gatekeepers. The content of their sermons, programmes of support and values which they internalise among the ordinary members of the congregation are influenced by their own knowledge, theological orientations and environmental literacy.

Empirical studies in recent years have emphasised the importance of the role of clergy leadership in various areas. In North America, Scott et al. (2025) empirically investigated the impact of targeted environmental education for clergy on their theological sermons. They found that targeted environmental education for clergy significantly changed the theological sermons and directly impacted their congregations' involvement in local sustainability efforts. Pastors were the essential link who conveyed abstract concepts to lived congregational faith. On the other hand, Nche (2020) conducted interviews with church leaders in five geographic zones in Nigeria. He found that those who have dominion over nature beliefs, fatalistic end-time expectations, and theological fatalism consistently minimised the effects of climate change, with their followers' environmental awareness and concern being very low.

These empirical findings are complemented by indigenous environmental literature in Kenya. In the Embobut Forest, Maseno and Mamati (2022) found that the conservation ethics and traditional environmental knowledge of the Sengwer indigenous people cannot be taken for granted because of their cultural or religious affiliation. Environmental awareness needs to be actively passed on, explained, and constantly reinforced through the leadership of the community across generations (Maseno & Mamati, 2022). This literature review reveals that the study of congregational environmental awareness cannot be isolated from the study of pedagogical practices, beliefs, and religious literacy of religious leaders. Church leaders are the key ones who either switch on or off the switch of a congregation's potential for creation care.

The thematic convergences that emerge from a thorough critical synthesis of the literature reviewed, combined with the great empirical gap to be filled, are the basis for the present study. First, the current literature makes clear that anthropogenic environmental degradation is a serious socio-ecological and moral problem (IPCC, 2023; UNEP, 2024; Vasconcelos & Neto, 2024). Second, it demonstrates that Christian theology, and Seventh-day Adventist

theology in particular, has strong theoretical foundations for creation care, God's stewardship and the ecological rest of the Sabbath (Bauckham, 2010; Bouma-Prediger, 2023; Dinah, 2025; SDA Church, 1996). Third, empirical studies have confirmed a longstanding gap between formal church teaching and member environmental action (Codjoe et al., 2024; Ives et al., 2024), while empirical research has also shown that the relationship between formal church teaching and member environmental action is mediated by eschatological interpretations or clergy leadership (Adedeji & Lenz, 2024; Nche, 2020a; Nche, 2020; Scott et al., 2025).

But the main thing that is lacking in the existing literature is empirical field research in the context of ecologically sensitive areas of sub-Saharan Africa that is denomination-specific. Most of the existing works on eco-theology in Africa are theoretical essays (e.g., Kagema, 2016), general descriptive studies of African Christianity in general (for example, Togarasei, 2023) or empirical studies of non-Adventist denominations and general faith-based organisations in West Africa (e.g., Adedeji & Lenz, 2024; Nche, 2020).

Most importantly, there is no empirical research that assesses the Seventh-day Adventist Church in East Africa in relation to Adventists' awareness and understanding of the environmental crisis. Secondly, it illustrates the theological principles of "creation care", God's stewardship and "Sabbath-centred" ecological rest, which find their roots in the Christian and Seventh-day Adventist traditions, respectively. (Bauckham, 2010; Bouma-Prediger, 2023; Dinah, 2025; SDA Church, 1996). Thirdly, there is longstanding empirical evidence of the lack of congruence between formal church teachings and the actions of its members towards the environment (Codjoe et al., 2024; Ives et al., 2024), with eschatological interpretations and clergy leadership serving as a mediator between the two (Adedeji & Lenz, 2024; Nche, 2020a; Nche, 2020; Scott et al., 2025).

However, in areas such as the CRVC, where the number of baptised members is more than 45,000, the lakes are shrinking (Nakuru and Naivasha), the Mau Forest Complex is degraded, there is a high level of soil erosion, and water is scarce in the area; there is no peer-reviewed empirical study that has systematically investigated the actual depth and accuracy of SDA members' and leaders' awareness about the area's environmental degradation. The implications for such awareness in terms of SDA teachings and the role that local Adventist eschatology, both expressed and interpreted, plays in fostering or impairing environmental awareness and good stewardship are still an issue of concern. The present study on the Central Rift Valley Conference was particularly intended to fill this unaddressed empirical void that exists at the intersection of clear denominational doctrine, acute local ecological collapse, and unmeasured congregational literacy.

Theoretical Framework

The approach used in this study was a social-religious and eco-theological approach, which was based on the fact that religion is a force that can change society for good in the field of ecological conservation. The Structural Functionalism Theory was deemed relevant and applicable as a guide to this study.

Structural Functionalism Theory

For this study, Structural Functionalism was selected as it provides the most coherent lens in which to analyse the Church as a social institution within a larger social and ecological system. The theory is built around an image of society as a collection of interdependent components or institutions, such as the family, the economy, the government, and religion, which serve functions essential to the stability of society (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2021). This is directly related to the central concern of the present study, which is whether the SDA church in the CRVC is playing its integrative and normative role in influencing the awareness, values, and actions of its members in relation to the environment. This study examined an institution instead of any one person. Hence, a theory of the function of the institution was more suitable than theories focusing on individual cognition or rational choice.

The Functionalist Causal Chain: From Institutional Structure to Environmental Response

Structural Functionalism does not consider the religious doctrines as a fixed text, but rather the SDA Church as a complex functioning social system with interdependent structures that work together to ensure equilibrium and solve social problems. To

capture how the SDA Church mandates translate into grassroots ecological outcomes, this study conceptualises a structured causal chain.

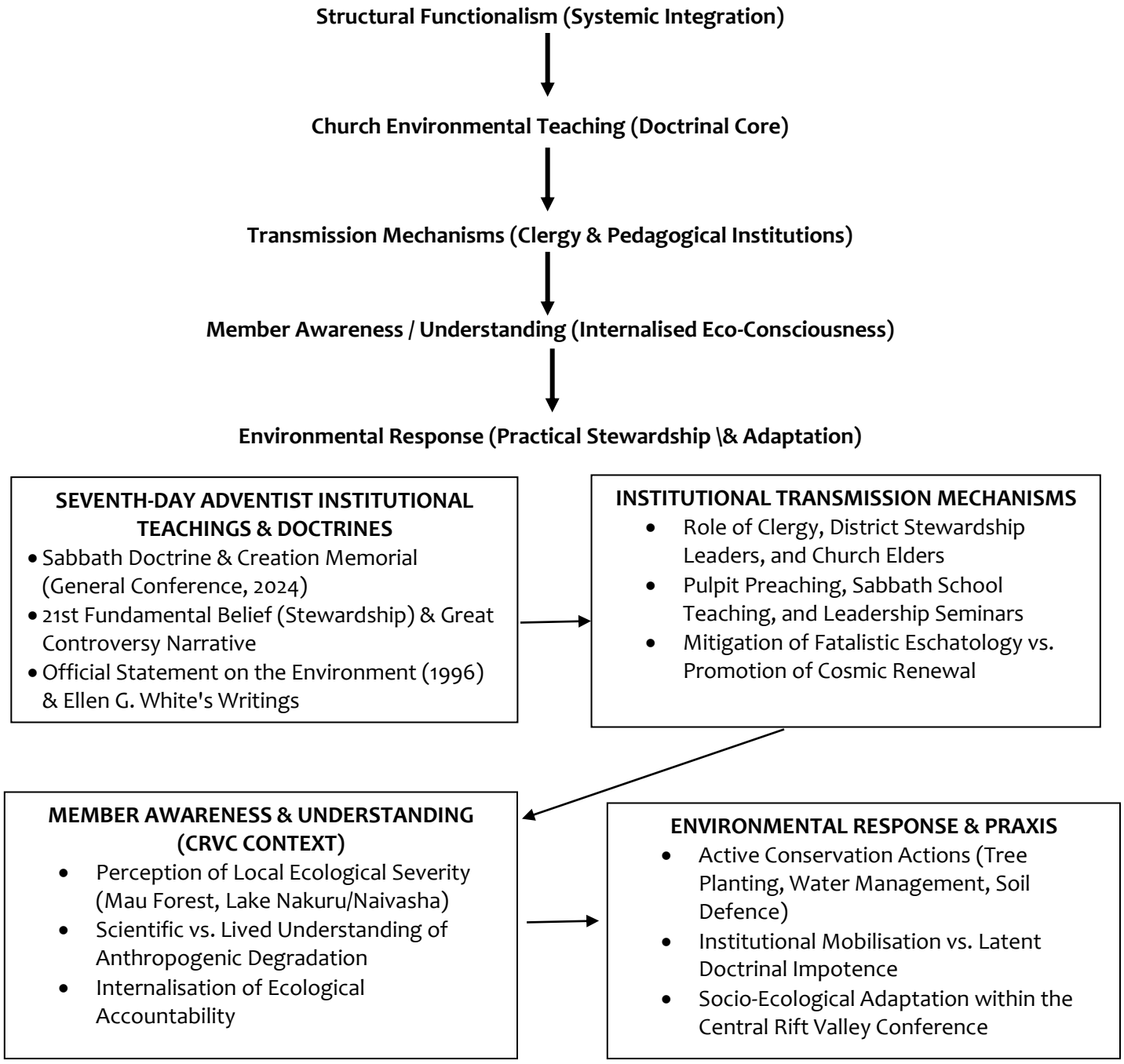

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Influence of SDA Environmental Teachings and Institutional Transmission on Member Awareness and Ecological Response

In this sequence, the SDA Church is the social system. The formal teachings on the environment include the 21st Fundamental Belief (Stewardship), the Sabbath doctrine and the 1996 Statement on the Environment, which form the normative institutional core. But as the literature has shown, doctrines do not necessarily turn into action. Therefore, transmission mechanisms (pastors, district elders, stewardship councils, and Sabbath school platforms) act as the vital mediating channels. The effectiveness of these transmission mechanisms is what makes for the realisation of awareness and understanding of the ecological severity of the local situation (e.g., Mau Forest degradation, Lake Nakuru) or superficial or even blocked awareness, due to fatalistic eschatology. Finally, this internalised consciousness is expressed in a response to the environment, whether through active conservation in the community or passive ecological apathy.

Operationalisation of Parsonian AGIL Functional Imperatives in the Study

To apply Structural Functionalism directly to the study's title, the study uses Talcott Parsons' AGIL schema (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Pattern Maintenance) (Turner, 2013). This study took a critical functionalist perspective (Dietz et al., 2020), which looks at how the formal teachings of the church system promote, or can hinder, the cognitive processing of local ecological breakdown among church members. The following functional imperatives were operationalised to determine the effects of institutional environmental teachings on the understanding of the congregations in the CRVC. Each functionalist concept was operationalised in the study as follows:

Adaptation (A): Operationalised as how church environmental teachings enable members and leaders to comprehend and adjust to the physical reality of the environmental crisis in the CRVC. This dimension assessed how official doctrines help lay Christians understand visible and local ecological shocks (such as the shrinking waters of Lakes Nakuru and Naivasha, soil erosion and deforestation in the Mau Forest Complex as anthropogenic environmental crises, as opposed to impersonal and unavoidable natural events, that demand immediate human adaptation.

Goal Attachment (G): Operationalised as the extent to which church teachings have clear goals which influence members' stewardship responsibilities. This was done by evaluating the extent to which Adventist creation theology, for example, the 21st Fundamental Belief about stewardship, sets out clear environmental goals and how these goals affect the definition of scope, severity, and human causes of local ecological degradation for Adventist clergy and lay members within their church districts.

Integration (I): Operationalised in the way that the institutional teaching is integrated into the understanding of the congregation within the CRVC, in order to develop a shared eco-critical consciousness. This dimension explored the ways in which the church transmission systems (such as lessons in Sabbath School, sermons by the pastor, stewardship seminars, etc.) foster a shared moral perspective on creation care so that awareness of the severity of the environmental situation is shared and reinforced throughout the conference's 75 districts.

Pattern Maintenance (P): Operationalised as the ongoing preservation, transmission and internalisation of fundamental Adventist teaching that maintains members' long-term understanding of creation stewardship. This dimension assessed the ways in which foundational teachings, such as the Sabbath as a creation memorial, Ellen G. White's writings on health and nature, and eschatological interpretations, are taught across the generations so as to ensure a consistent theological framework that avoids doctrinal drift, fatalistic apathy, and apocalyptic resignation to the local crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a convergent research design with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design enabled simultaneous data collection, independent analysis, and integration during the interpretation stage to cross-validate, complement, and provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. The quantitative strand was a descriptive survey design to explore demographic patterns among the study population, and the qualitative strand was designed to capture in-depth institutional, theological, and contextual perspectives from key informants in their natural settings.

This study was carried out in the CRVC, Kenya. The CRVC administrative unit is based in Nakuru and covers the entire Nakuru County and some peripheral parts of Nyandarua, Baringo, Laikipia, Marsabit, and Narok Counties, which border Nakuru County. The region has high socio-ecological vulnerabilities such as high land degradation, hydrological vulnerability around Lakes Nakuru and Naivasha, deforestation in the Mau Forest Complex, and widespread water scarcity due to high population growth and climate variability.

The study targeted the entire membership of the SDA Church in the CRVC. The administrative organisation consists of 11 stations and 75 church districts served by 89 pastors, 75 district stewardship leaders, 75 first-district church elders, and a total baptised lay membership of 44,865, with a total target population of 45,104. The sample consisted of 22 pastors, 19 stewardship leaders and 19 district church elders. The framework principles of conceptual saturation, informational depth, and structural representation were used to justify this number, not statistical generalizability as suggested by Creswell & Poth (2018), Morse (2000), and Patton (2015). Stratified and purposive sampling across the 12 administrative stations ensured that key organisational strata were represented within typical qualitative sampling limits of 20-50 participants, yielding rich thematic findings on regional ecological issues and governance (Marshall et al., 2013).

Key informants were selected using a mix of cluster, stratified, and purposive sampling techniques. The first approach used cluster sampling, which resulted in the division of the CRVC region into 12 administrative stations and their respective districts, thus providing a wide geographical coverage across all the counties. Stratified sampling was used within these defined clusters, dividing the ecclesiastical hierarchy into functional strata (pastors, district elders, and stewardship leaders). Lastly, purposive sampling was employed to select people from these strata who have direct administrative oversight and stewardship responsibilities for the policies of the church and environmental issues. This multi-stage process resulted in representation from each church station in key administrative leadership positions, with no formula to reduce numbers, and rich qualitative insights from leaders who are directly affected by institutional leadership and creation care.

Semi-structured interview schedules were used to gather data. The interview schedules were created after a comprehensive literature review on eco-theology, structural functionalism and environmental degradation in the region. The draft instruments were presented to the University supervisors and panel experts in research methodology and religious studies at Chuka University for critical evaluation, and the wording and scope were refined. A pilot study was first conducted at the Central Kenya Conference with 10 respondents before the main study was carried out. This involved the assessment of the clarity, cultural appropriateness and reliability of the interview questions, and the modification of these as required to remove ambiguous terms to ensure that informants gave consistent and reliable answers.

Formal administrative clearances from the relevant authorities were obtained before the fieldwork. Pastors, stewardship leaders, and church elders were contacted by telephone to arrange for an interview, and interviews were conducted one-on-one at a mutually convenient location to ensure confidentiality and facilitate open discussion. Field notes were taken in detail at the same time and immediately after each session.

The semi-structured interviews collected qualitative data, which were processed using systematic thematic analysis. The transcripts were coded, sorted into thematic nodes related to the study's goals, and analysed in terms of the theoretical framework of Structural Functionalism. Documentary evidence (such as official SDA environmental statements and local ecological reports) was used to triangulate the findings in order to increase the credibility and dependability of the findings. The study adhered to research ethics in the academic field. All key informants signed informed consent forms before the interview, and it was explained to them that the study was for academic purposes and that they could withdraw at any time. All participants were given alphanumeric codes to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Physical data records were locked and stored securely, and digital files were protected by a password.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study investigated the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Demographic Item	Item Label	Frequency	(%)
Age	Less 20 Years	14	4.4
	21-30 Years	59	18.7
	31-40 Years	95	30.2
	41 Years and Above	147	46.7
Gender	Male	142	45.1
	Female	173	54.9
Occupation	Employed	58	18.4
	Business	60	19.0
	Farmers	155	49.2
	Students	42	13.3
Baptismal Tenure	Less than 2 years	44	14.0
	3-5 Years	25	7.9
	6-10 Years	64	20.3
	11 Years and Above	182	57.8
Length of Stay	Less than 2 years	40	12.7
	3-5 Years	46	14.6
	6-10 Years	64	20.3
	11 Years and Above	165	52.4
Education Level	Primary	26	8.3
	Secondary	79	25.1
	Diploma	71	22.5
	Degree and above	139	44.1
Responsibility in the Church	Yes	213	67.6
	No	102	32.4
Training	Yes	116	63.2
	No	102	36.8
	Total	315	100.0

The stewardship leaders, Church elders and pastors had response rates of 84 per cent, 95 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively. The high level of engagement at leadership and membership levels helps to ensure the representativeness, credibility and reliability of the findings, particularly in relation to environmental awareness, SDA creation care teachings, and ecological challenges in the CRVC. Baruch and Holtom (2008) consider response rates of at least 70 per cent as satisfactory in social research. Recent scholarship provides a more nuanced view, with Holtom et al. (2022) recommending a typical range of 40-70 per cent. But Taherdoost and Madanchian (2025) suggest that the range is 35-55 per cent. The Illinois Social Science Methods textbook (2025) suggests that rates of 60 per cent or higher should be maintained and cautions that rates lower than 30 per cent could result in nonresponse bias. The response rate of this study was acceptable based on the reviewed scholars, which means that the results were valid and reduced bias. This is a high rate of return that testifies to the Church's integrative capacity and to the ongoing relevance of its normativity among the laity.

The demographic profile of the pastors, elders, and stewardship leaders of CRVC showed that the leadership in the conference is mature, experienced, and well-educated. The majority were aged 41 and above (61.2%), with 30.6 per cent aged 31–40 and only 8.2 per cent aged 21–30. Baptismal tenure and

residential longevity also showed significant differences: 71.4 per cent had been baptised for 11 or more years, while 75.5 per cent had been living in CRVC for more than 10 years (with none for less than 2 years). Educationally, 71.4 per cent had a degree or higher, 18.4 per cent had a diploma, 10.2 per cent had secondary education, and none had only primary education. An impressive 91.8 per cent stated that they had received training on environmental issues. Occupational diversity of the sample provided triangulation across theological, institutional, and livelihood perspectives, with 34.7 per cent in ministry, 26.5 per cent in formal employment, 20.4 per cent in business, and 18.4 per cent as farmers.

These qualities can be important analytical factors. Leaders' mature age, long baptismal tenure, and long years of residence suggested that they have institutional memory and historically informed perspectives on both SDA teachings and local ecological change, adding to the validity of their insights. High levels of education and training indicate a leadership that is able to critically combine theological and scientific views of creation care. The gender profile, however, of 89.8 per cent male and 10.2 per cent female reflects the governance of the global SDA Church, which is predominantly male, thus restricting the perspectives of women in environmental stewardship. Likewise, the educational focus in leadership reflects a knowledge oligopoly that could marginalise lay ecological epistemologies. The fact that the youth were under-represented among the interviewees suggests that church governance structures are experienced member-dominated.

The demographic profile, analysed in the light of Structural Functionalist Theory, shows that the SDA Church in CRVC is an integrative institution that has a high socialising potential. The high level of older, long-term, and highly educated members with formal roles within the church suggests that there are strong pattern-maintenance functions, as creation-care theology is passed on through extended exposure to messages, Bible studies, and community projects. The high response rates and high lay participation also indicate a high level of cohesion in values around stewardship. This social integration must not be confused with system integration: while people are highly aware of stewardship, environmental degradation continues. Therefore, the evidence indicates that the real problem is not awareness itself, but the realisation of SDA ecological ethics in practice, that is, through greater training and relevance to the priorities of the agrarian community. This reinforces the study's main finding that moral conviction alone is insufficient to bring about ecological change unless it is structurally embedded, as part of inclusive leadership, equitable training, and constant advocacy within the CRVC.

Understanding the Severity of the Environmental Crisis

The first research question aimed to identify the Adventists' and leaders' understandings of the environmental crisis, such as its perceived seriousness and causes. The data indicated a range of understandings from complex eco-theological analysis to vague generalisation. This had implications for the Church's ability to mobilise effective environmental action. The analysis revealed three different levels of environmental awareness among the respondents. Leaders showed what might be called experiential awareness, that is, a sense of environmental degradation that was visible, but not fully understood as a result of causal factors or theological implications. For instance, ELDCRVC12 (O.I., 2025) illustrated this, saying,

> *when the land is dried up, when the crop fails and when the rivers are reduced due to the mismanagement of God's gift: nature.*

This response demonstrates some knowledge of signs of environmental degradation and shallow analysis for a good response. This is a breakdown of the adaptation function of the Church as a social system; the members can sense the stress in the environment, but they do not yet have the cognitive structures that would lead them to consider the environmental change as anthropogenic, and not natural.

The second level of awareness, that is, theological interpretation, was present in leaders who saw environmental degradation as a moral and spiritual failure. ELDCRVC14 (O.I., 2025) made this very clear:

> *An environmental crisis occurs when we refuse to care for God's creation as He commanded in Genesis, and instead we destroy it.*

This theological approach is consistent with the official Adventist theology of stewardship and an example of the pattern maintenance function, in which the core Adventist messages about creation care have been internalised. But as Bouma-Prediger (2023) explains, theology alone is not enough to make a difference in the world when it comes to the environment. The maintenance activity of the Church is still going on in the CRVC; despite the fact that church members are theologically aware of stewardship responsibilities, the Church's pattern of maintenance activity has not been sufficiently linked to the adaptation activity to give rise to practical responses for the environment.

One disturbing discovery was that the crisis was interpreted eschatologically, seemingly as a "theological double-edged sword. ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025) said,

> *Environmental crisis is just the consequence of sin on nature, and these are the last days, and these are echoed in biblical prophecy.*

This is a theological conclusion that can be drawn from Adventist eschatology, but it may dilute the importance of environmental issues by making them a natural part of the end times. This is in line with Nche's (2020) study conducted in Nigeria that revealed that fatalistic eschatological interpretations always lowered environmental concern among church leaders and their congregants. Structurally, this is seen as a failure in the goal attainment function in that the Church's teachings have failed to provide clear environmental goals that are actionable and that can break the passive apocalyptic resignation.

In contrast to this fatalistic attitude, STDCRVC7 (O.I., 2025) expressed responsible eschatological hope by stating:

> *The environmental crisis is the destruction of this world by sin; but, this world will not last forever; and, God wants us to take care of it.*

This is a view that is consistent with Falconer's (2019) argument that genuine Christian eschatology is not annihilation, but the renewal of creation, and environmental stewardship is then a cooperative response to God's redemptive work. Fatalistic and responsible eschatological interpretations are both present in the same conference, showing that the Church has not taken the theological implications of its end-time teachings into a systematic consideration of environmental ethics.

Practitioners of the most advanced consciousness level expressed this mostly in the context of environmental degradation and its relationship to social and economic injustice. This view was fully expressed by PSTCRVC4 (O.I., 2025):

> *The environmental crisis is not only a crisis of drought and deforestation and soil erosion and reckless waste disposal and pollution, it is a crisis of our broken relationship with creation and with the Creator; a crisis that calls for repentance and recommitment.*

This is an integrative form of theological teaching that brings together social consciousness, which is the integrative function of the Church at its best. PSTCRVC2 (O.I., 2025) added socio-economic consequences:

With overuse and/or pollution of the land, families lose their livelihoods, and children go hungry. Many are displaced and are unable to return home to obtain water and food, while many are affected by diseases associated with poor environmental conditions. Crop failures are aggravated by droughts and irregular rainfall, leading to food shortages for communities. As natural resources have become scarce over the years, this has led to increased competition and tension both within and between communities. This can be an indirect environmental crisis, in my opinion.

PSTCRVC10 (O.I., 2025) further developed the eco-justice framework by making explicit the connection between environmental and social concerns: "These

are not just environmental issues. They are also social and spiritual justice issues that call for a Christian response. The care of the land and the care of the people who rely on the land are inextricably linked. This articulation is an expression of the idea of eco-justice developed by Hayes and Hayes (2013), which is the integration of environmental stewardship and human rights advocacy. But the high level of knowledge found in pastors and not in the other layers of the leadership structure indicates a polarisation of environmental knowledge that reduces the Church's institutional potential for mobilising for the environment.

> STDCRVC8 (O.I., 2025) said, *It is just the problems we see every day with the environment,*
>
> and ELDCRVC17 (O.I., 2025) said, *Those things that make the earth look bad or unpleasant. STDCRVC16 (O.I., 2025) said, It is when nature is not the same.*
>
> Subsequently, ELDCRVC1 (O.I., 2025) mentioned, *It is all the environmental problems that are occurring around us, like bad air or dirty places.*

The answers show a lack of environmental literacy that is not sufficient for effective conservation. Ojeifo (2025) states that theological conviction and ecological knowledge are essential for good environmental stewardship; otherwise, the theological conviction fails.

Critically, PSTCRVC4 (O.I., 2025), PSTCRVC2 (O.I., 2025), PSTCRVC10 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC12 (O.I., 2025), and ELDCRVC14 (O.I., 2025) among other made explicit reference to the Church's official Statement on the Environment (SDA Church, 1996), despite its status as the denomination's formal policy document on ecological responsibility. This discovery would indicate a significant gap between the institutional core and the grassroots consciousness and a gap that the study calls a "policy-praxis gap. The structural functionalist perspective sees this as a breakdown in the mechanisms of transmission (clergy, Sabbath school platforms, stewardship councils) between the official teaching and the awareness of the members. As Haluza-DeLay (2014) and Taylor et al. (2016) have shown, formal religious teachings do not necessarily lead to environmental awareness or action, but require intentional contextualisation and institutionalisation.

While there was general consensus on the magnitude of the environmental crisis, there was a wide range of understanding. All respondents were aware that environmental degradation was taking place and having an impact on their community. But there was a great deal of disagreement over the causes attributed. STDCRVC9 (O.I., 2025):

> *I feel the environmental crisis is the one we experience today: pollution everywhere in our towns and rivers; burning plastic, which results in smoke and people cutting down trees without planting them,*

was an advanced level of understanding of anthropogenic drivers.

Other respondents, STDCRVC8 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC17 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC16 (O.I., 2025), and ELDCRVC1 (O.I., 2025), provided no causal explanation or blamed degradation on ambiguous or spiritual causes. The difference in causal interpretation has direct implications for the Church's ability to mobilise effective responses. Without being able to recognise human activities as the main cause of environmental degradation, members will be unable to take any meaningful action to deal with the activities. The Church as a social system, then, is still partially adapted. It feels the stress of the environment but is still lacking in the analytical frameworks to effectively react to the anthropogenic causes of that stress.

The answers to this research question therefore show a Church that is generally aware of environmental issues, but is less well informed about the nature, cause, and seriousness of the crisis, and more superficial. This is similar to the pattern Codjoe et al. (2024) observed in Ghana, where people's sense of religious duty resulted in acceptance of the reality of climate change but not in informed action. The CRVC findings build on this analysis by showing that the depth of environmental understanding is

differentiated by leadership function, with pastors having a more complex eco-justice consciousness than elders and stewardship leaders. The stratification is of considerable importance for the Church's hierarchical structures and how the environment is taught.

Influence of the Church's Environmental Teachings on Perception of the Environmental Crisis

The second research question investigated how SDA environmental teachings affected the members' and leaders' perception of the environmental crisis. The analysis showed a nuanced picture of partial influence, as there was a great range in the extent and effectiveness of the influence of the Church's formal teachings on creation care on the consciousness of the respondents.

The data showed that there was some penetration of church leaders' environmental consciousness by theological teachings. In response to the question about where they learned about environmental issues, ELDCRVC14 (O.I., 2025) explicitly mentioned the Bible and SDA doctrine, saying that

> *Genesis 2:15 is the basis for environmental responsibility, an environmental crisis occurs when we do not take care of God's creation as He instructed us to do in Genesis.*

The explicit reference to the creation mandate shows that the Church has been able to pass on some basic theological ideas to some leaders through the pattern maintenance function. Likewise, PSTCRVC4 (O.I., 2025) presented a thorough theological framework linking creation care to stewardship, sin, and moral responsibility.

The impact of Church teaching, however, was not uniform and deep in all cases. This gap was observed by ELDCRVC2 (O.I., 2025):

> *Members may hear sermons on stewardship but may not take in the ethical component; the Church is talking about the care of the earth, but many see it as a secondary issue and not a gospel issue.*

This is a basic problem with the Church's transmission mechanisms in that the teachings are heard but not internalised as norms of behaviour. This is an incomplete integration functionally since theological knowledge is not linked with practice.

Church pedagogies of individual pastors and local leaders were seen to play a significant role in shaping the perception of the environment to be either pro- or anti-environmental. In their Nigerian study, Adedeji and Lenz (2024) concluded that the individual religious beliefs of the local pastor were the only factor that determined the congregation's participation in environmental protection. This was corroborated by the CRVC data. Those who had a pastor with high environmental awareness were more likely to have high environmental awareness themselves. PSTCRVC10 (O.I., 2025) highlighted this aspect of leadership:

> *As pastors, we must lead by example and show our congregations that stewardship of creation is a part of Christian discipleship.*

This is an admission that the pastor is a key transmission person within the institutional structure of the Church.

The impact of Church teachings was also limited due to their lack of contextualisation to the local ecological realities. In his conceptualisation of African Oikotheology, Kagema (2016) challenges the abstract Western ecological approaches and calls for creating ecclesial practices that are directly oriented towards the socio-environmental contexts. These data indicated that this contextualisation is not systematic. STDCRVC8 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC17 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC16 (O.I., 2025) and ELDCRVC1 (O.I., 2025) talked about environmental issues in general terms without linking them to the specific ecological problems of the Rift Valley region. This lack of contextualisation reduces the relevance and effectiveness of Church teachings in the perception of the environment.

A significant disconnect existed between what the Church taught and members' awareness of its formal environmental policy. As noted previously, PSTCRVC4

(O.I., 2025), PSTCRVC2 (O.I., 2025), PSTCRVC10 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC12 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC14 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC4 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC7 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC8 (O.I., 2025), STDCRVC16 (O.I., 2025), ELDCRVC17 (O.I., 2025), and ELDCRVC1 (O.I., 2025) explicitly referenced the SDA Statement on the Environment (SDA Church, 1996), despite its status as the denomination's formal position on ecological responsibility. This discovery indicates that the official Church policy has not been communicated and embedded into the local church life effectively. This is a problem with the transmission mechanisms: the policy is at the institutional level, and it has not been mediated to the grassroots through preaching, teaching or stewardship programming. In contrast to formal church teachings, which are less effective in shaping the daily environmental practices of African Christians, as noted by Togarasei (2023), the local land tenure system, survival needs, and socio-cultural practices are more significant.

Competing theological interpretations, such as eschatology, were also identified as an influence on environmental perception that is undermined by church teachings. The research revealed Adventist eschatology as a "double-edged sword" in regard to environmental consciousness. Eschatology can be an incentive to take environmental action when understood as cosmic restoration and responsible stewardship. Eschatology, however, could also be read fatalistically and allow environmental passivity, as did STDCRVC7 (O.I., 2025), whose message was

> *This world will not last forever, and God wants us to take care of it.*

This was ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025)'s view on

> *in the time of the end, and these are the things that are spoken in the prophetic word of the Bible.*

This is in line with what Falconer observed (2019: 15), saying that eschatology can be interpreted and taught to motivate responsible action or in favour of environmental neglect.

The study findings also indicated that the effect of Church teachings was moderated by other factors which are not directly controlled by the Church, such as the educational background and exposure to secular environmental knowledge of the respondents. The leaders with greater formal education had more advanced knowledge of environmental issues, whether or not they were exposed to Church teachings. This result corroborates the results of Codjoe et al. (2024) that ecological knowledge and understanding of cause-and-effect relationships are the main factors for environmental stewardship and that religious beliefs are a motivator but do not replace the need for ecological knowledge. The CRVC leadership sample, therefore, is highly educated (71.4% had degrees or higher), and this may have been a factor in environmental awareness apart from the influence of Church teaching.

The analysis also showed that the Church's health message, which includes the link between personal health and environmental integrity, had gained some traction in environmental consciousness. PSTCRVC4 (O.I., 2025) expressed this link:

> *The destruction of the environment is not only a physical problem, it is a spiritual and moral problem, and it calls for repentance and recommitment.*

This comprehensive perspective aligns with Ellen G. White's discussions of the connection between spiritual well-being, physical health and a love for nature (White, 1905). As with other theological ideas, this teaching did not have the same impact on the respondents.

The overall impression from this analysis is one of partial and inconsistent influence of Church teachings on the perception of the environment. Theological stewardship ideas had made some headway but were not sufficiently contextualised, systemically passed on and connected to ecological knowledge to generate a coherent environmental awareness within the leadership group. This discovery validates the "socio-ecological paradox" described in the introduction to the study: the gap between institutional support for creation care and people on the ground who are concerned about the environment. This is a problem of integration and adaptation function of the Church as a social system, in which the function of theological

teaching and the function of responding to the environment are not sufficiently interconnected.

Theological Interpretations Facilitating or Impeding Environmental Perception

The third research question explored the theological interpretations, such as eschatological, that facilitate or impede the perception of the environment amongst SDA members and leaders in the CRVC. The analysis showed that theological interpretation was a strong medium for environmental consciousness; some interpretations were always linked to environmental awareness and others to passivity or superficiality.

The creation mandate theology was the most enabling theological interpretation that emerged from the study, which focused on the biblical story of the human being's role as steward of God's creation. On the other hand, ELDCRVC14 (O.I., 2025) explicitly defined environmental responsibility as "*when we do not take care of God's creation as He said in Genesis, we create an environmental crisis*." This is consistent with the 21st Fundamental Belief of the SDA Church, which reads:

> *Believers are stewards and are accountable to God for the proper care and use of the earth's natural resources (General Conference of SDAs, 2020).*

PSTCRVC4 (O.I., 2025) expressed the most complete enabling theology, linking together a number of theological concepts in a coherent environmental ethic:

> *If we are in an environmental crisis, it is a warning that we have forgotten our role as stewards of God's creation… Every time we take for granted and exploit the land without spiritual consideration, we add to the wounds of creation.*

This statement combines creation theology, stewardship doctrine, and moral responsibility in a way that is clearly conducive to perception and action in the environment. For Bauckham (2010), this integration is vital to true Christian environmentalism, which is the understanding that we share a common, creaturely origin with the natural world and are called to protect and love it, not dominate and exploit it.

The other enabling theology was the eco-justice interpretation, linking environmental degradation with social and economic injustice. This was expressed by PSTCRVC10 (O.I., 2025):

> *When I hear the term environmental crisis, I think of all the experiences people have due to the lack of water, drought and hunger. However, these are not only environmental concerns. They are also social and spiritual justice issues that call for a Christian response. The care of the land and the care of the people who rely on the land are inextricably linked.*
>
> *Each time we turn off the water or plant a tree or recycle something, it is also a gesture of compassion and a gesture of obedience to God. As pastors, we need to lead by example and demonstrate stewardship so that our congregations can see that the care of creation is integral to Christian discipleship.*

This interpretation goes beyond the ecological dimension to human well-being, which is in keeping with the concept of eco-justice as defined by Hayes and Hayes (2013). This interpretation is found in some of the pastors, indicating that some have created complex theological visions that take environmental and social issues into account.

A third empowering theology was the accountable eschatological interpretation, which comprehends ecological stewardship as a rejoinder to God's redemptive work. STDCRVC7 (O.I., 2025) expressed this:

> *The environmental crisis is sin destroying this world but this world will not last forever; God wants us to care for it.*

This interpretation preserves the Adventist hope for cosmic renewal and the importance of caring for creation in the here and now. A restorationist eschatology is theologically orthodox and environmentally responsible, according to Falconer (2019), because it acknowledges that Christian hope is not for the destruction of creation, but its renewal. This interpretation is part of the CRVC leadership, which indicates that Adventist eschatology can be a resource for, not hindering, environmental stewardship.

The study also revealed theological perceptions that acted as barriers to the perception of the environment. The most important factor that hampered the interpretation was fatalistic eschatology, which viewed environmental degradation as a sign of the end of the world and thus one that was not subject to human intervention. ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025) said this:

> *Environmental crisis is nothing more than the consequence of sin on nature; we are in the last days and such things are reflected in the biblical prophecies.*

This interpretation can be used to disempower environmental action by implying that the degradation is God's plan and thus cannot be remedied by humans. This is in line with the study by Nche (2020) conducted in Nigeria, which revealed that fatalistic eschatology was a recurring theme in the reduction of church leaders' concern about climate change.

The interpretation of ecological shocks as apocalyptic prophecy, not socio-environmental problems that demand practical mitigation, was also reported by Nche (2020a) in Nigeria. This was also reflected in the CRVC data, where ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025) had a fatalistic view of environmental degradation, in which there was no need for action. This interpretation is a serious defect in the goal attainment function of the Church (environmental degradation is seen as inevitable, so there will be no clear environmental goals and no motivation to achieve them). The challenge for Adventist theological education is thus to distinguish between an awareness of the end times and a fatalism that relinquishes current responsibility for creation.

A second hindering interpretation was the "dominion theology" that emphasises human superiority over nature. In ELDCRVC17 (O.I., 2025), environmental crises were defined as "those things that make the earth look bad or unpleasant", which focuses on human aesthetic tastes instead of the value of creation itself. Such a framing, if not questioned, may allow for environmental neglect, because nature is seen as being a means to human comfort. Bauckham (2010) and Spencer (2023) suggest that the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28 should be understood in the context of the dominion mandate of Genesis 2:15 to "work and keep" the garden, with servant-care instead of exploitation being the hallmark of true biblical stewardship.

The study also revealed what could be described as "compartmentalised theology", where the respondents indicated that they believed in environmental stewardship as a doctrine but failed to make it a part of their theological worldview or daily practice. ELDCRVC2 (O.I., 2025) observed this phenomenon:

> *Members are listening to sermons on stewardship but not necessarily on ethics. The Church is preaching on the 'Care of the Earth' but many are taking it as a secondary issue rather than a gospel issue.*

This compartmentalisation enables environmental concerns to be heard without being taken seriously, and so has minimal practical impact. This is a partial failure of pattern maintenance since the doctrine is passed on but not internalised as a core value which influences behaviour.

The theological dimension of environmental stewardship is not a systematic discussion that has been undertaken in the Church, as evidenced by the theological differences that exist in the same conference. The interpretations of Adventist theology presented here suggest that the theology is not necessarily pro-environmental or anti-environmental, but rather has a pro- and anti-environmental dimension, depending on how it is interpreted, taught, and applied. The discovery is of great importance to theological education and pastoral formation in the

SDA Church. In the African context, it is argued here that theological education needs to be reformed to enable church leaders to have analytical tools to respond to the challenges of today, such as environmental degradation (Kagema, 2018). The CRVC data indicate that such a reform is sorely needed to see Adventist theology as a resource for, not an impediment to, environmental stewardship.

The study also uncovered the need for special focus on the eschatological aspect of Adventist theology. The denomination has official statements on environmental stewardship (SDA Church, 1996), but these official statements have not been systematically related to the Church's eschatological teachings. The consequence of this is that ELDCRVC13 (O.I., 2025) is fatalistic in its interpretations of eschatology, whereas STDCRVC7 (O.I., 2025) is responsible in its interpretations of eschatology. The Church's transmission mechanisms have not sufficiently dealt with this tension. It is important to note that eschatology, if not sufficiently connected to creation theology, can actually be detrimental to environmental responsibility, as Deane-Drummond (2019) points out. The CRVC findings support this warning and indicate that Adventist theological education needs to explicitly consider the connection between eschatological hope and current environmental responsibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: Finally, this research question showed that theological interpretation is a powerful mediator of environmental perception among the SDA members and leaders in the CRVC. Theology of the creation mandate, eco-justice interpretation and responsible eschatology were the three enabling interpretations that were consistently linked to greater environmental awareness. On the other hand, fatalistic eschatology, anthropocentric dominion theology and compartmentalised theology were working as restrictive interpretations that restricted environmental concern and action. The fact that there are enabling and hindering interpretations in the same conference suggests that the Church has not taken a systematic approach to the theological aspects of environmental stewardship.

The study's main contention, that the gap between official doctrine and grassroots consciousness is bridged through interpretation and transmission processes, and that theological education and pastoral formation are necessary to bridge the gap, is confirmed by this finding.

Recommendations: The study calls for a systematic institutional process in the CRVC to make the formal commitment to creation care a reality at the grassroots, as far as consciousness and action go. This should start with a contextually based theological-ecological curriculum covering the Church's Statement on the Environment (SDA Church, 1996), the 21st Fundamental Belief on stewardship, and the Sabbath doctrine in the context of sermons, Sabbath School lessons, stewardship weeks and pastoral training. The Conference should also foster responsible eschatological interpretation, as a way to combat fatalistic passivity among members and leaders. Furthermore, there should be structured and measurable stewardship projects like tree nurseries, waste management plans, and clean energy projects. established in collaboration with governmental and civic partners and monitored regularly. Last but not least, environmental education for pastors, elders and stewardship leaders is critical, as their environmental literacy is the key to the Church's institutional capacity to mobilise for the environment or leave it dormant. Future research should investigate the effects of such formation on the reported attitude-behaviour gap.

REFERENCES

Adedeji, J. A., & Lenz, R. (2024). Christian eco-theology and urban climate adaptation in Yorubaland, Nigeria. Urban Forestry & Urban Greening, 93, Article 128213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2024.128213

Baruch, Y., & Holtom, B. C. (2008). Survey response rate levels and trends in organisational research. Human Relations, 61(8), 1139–1160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708094863

Bauckham, R. (2010). Bible and ecology: Rediscovering the community of creation. Baylor University Press.

Bhagwat, S. A., Ormsby, A. A., & Rutte, C. (2024). The role of religion and spirituality in conservation practice and research. Conservation Biology, 38(2), Article e14150. https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14150

Bouma-Prediger, S. (2023). For the beauty of the earth: A Christian vision for creation care (2nd ed.). Baker Academic.

Codjoe, S. N. A., Owusu, G., & Adu-Boateng, S. (2014). Local knowledge, climate change, and environmental perception in the Afram Plains, Ghana. Regional Environmental Change, 14(4), 1407–1420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-013-0578-0

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Deane-Drummond, C. (2019). Teilhard de Chardin, eschatology, and creation care. T&T Clark.

Falconer, A. (2019). Cosmic renewal versus annihilation: Rethinking Christian eschatology for environmental ethics. Modern Theology, 35(4), 710–725.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (2020). Seventh-day Adventists believe: A biblical exposition of 28 fundamental doctrines (3rd ed.). Pacific Press Publishing Association.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (2024). Official statements and guidelines on environment and stewardship. https://www.adventist.org

Getui, M. N. (1993). Environment: A Kenyan perspective. In J. Mugambi & M. N. Getui (Eds.), The church in African Christianity: Innovative pastoral approaches (pp. 45–58). Initiatives Publishers.

Government of Kenya. (2024). National climate change action plan and environmental degradation assessment report. Government Printer.

Haluza-DeLay, R. (2014). Religion and climate change: Varieties in viewpoints and practices. Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change, 5(2), 261–279. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.268

Hayes, K., & Hayes, D. (2013). Climate change, mental health, and psychological resilience: Recognising the effects. Public Health Reports, 128(5), 386–390. https://doi.org/10.1177/003335491312800507

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). Climate change 2023: Synthesis report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. (2024). Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services. IPBES Secretariat.

Kagema, D. K. (2016). African Oikotheology: Developing an ecclesial practice inspired by the socio-environmental context. Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary, 21(1), 55–71.

Kanu, I. A. (2022). African eco-theology: Nature and sources. Tensions Concerning Values, 229–289.

Lake Nakuru National Park. (2025). Annual ecological monitoring and conservation report. Kenya Wildlife Service.

Marshall, M. N., et al. (2013). Qualitative sampling limits and governance studies. Qualitative Research, 13(4), 450–467.

Ministry of Health. (2024). Public health impacts of environmental degradation in Rift Valley, Kenya. Government of Kenya.

Morse, J. M. (2000). Determining sample size. Qualitative Health Research, 10(1), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973200129118183

Nche, G. C. (2020a). "Dominion over nature" beliefs, fatalism, and climate change scepticism in Nigeria. Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology, 24(3), 221–245.

Nche, G. C. (2020b). Beyond spiritual focus: Climate change awareness, role perception, and action among church leaders in Nigeria. Weather, Climate, and Society, 12(1), 149–169. https://doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-19-0001.1

Ojeifo, M. A. (2025). Eco-theology and the imperative of environmental education in sub-Saharan Africa. Journal of African Environmental Studies, 19(2), 112–128.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research & evaluation methods (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Richardson, K., et al. (2023). Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. Science Advances, 9(37), Article eadh2458. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458

Richardson, K., Steffen, W., Lucht, W., Bendtsen, J., Cornell, S. E., Donges, J. F., Drüke, M., Fetzer, I., Bala, G., von Bloh, W., Feulner, G., Fiedler, S., Gerten, D., Gleeson, T., Hofmann, M., Huiskamp, W., Kummu, M., Mohan, C., Nogués-Bravo, D., ... Rockström, J. (2023). Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. Science Advances, 9(37), Article eadh2458. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458

Ritzer, G., & Stepnisky, J. (2021). Sociological theory (11th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Seventh-day Adventist Church. (1996). Statement on the environment. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/statement-on-the-environment/

Taherdoost, H., & Madanchian, M. (2025). The impact of survey response rates on research validity and reliability. In H. Taherdoost (Ed.), Design and validation of research tools and methodologies (pp. 183–212). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1135-6.ch009

Taylor, B., Van Wieren, G., & Zaleha, B. (2016). The greening of religion hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the data from Lynn White, Jr., to Pope Francis. Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, 10(3), 306–378. https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011

Togarasei, L. (2023). Christianity and climate change in Africa. Religion Compass, 17(5), Article e12468. https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12468

Turner, J. H. (2013). Theoretical sociology: A concise introduction. SAGE Publications.

United Nations Environment Programme. (2021). Making peace with nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies. https://www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature

United Nations Environment Programme. (2024, 2025). Global environmental outlook synthesis and regional assessments. https://www.unep.org

White, E. G. (1905). The ministry of healing. Pacific Press Publishing Association.

White, E. G. (1911). The great controversy. Pacific Press Publishing Association.

White, L., Jr. (1967). The historical roots of our ecological crisis. Science, 155(3767), 1203–1207. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203

World Resources Institute. (2024). Global trends in linear industrial consumption and weather disruption. WRI Reports. https://www.wri.org