ANNEXURE A

Task Team Ecology

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ECOLOGY MINISTRIES

Foreword

What is meant by a theological framework for ecology ministries?

When this document speaks about a 'theological framework', something specific is meant. This is not a comprehensive manual with step-by-step instructions for every congregation, and neither is it a complete policy document that makes every practical decision in advance. A framework is rather **a set of well-founded, theological convictions, points of departure, and questions that give direction**. It creates space and language in which congregations, church councils, and individuals can make their own context-sensitive decisions concerning ecology ministry.

A theological framework is therefore **more of an invitation than a prescription.** It invites church members, church councils, and synodal structures to reinvestigate, as part of God's household, their own understanding of calling, witness, and responsibility. This reinvestigation is **rooted in Scripture and tradition**, it **keeps us answerable to one another**, and it is **open for ongoing discussion** as understanding deepens and circumstances change.

1. **Introductory: Ecology ministry is concerned with the heart of the Christian faith.**

For Christian believers the present ecological crises are **of vital importance** in more than one respect. On the one hand we say that ecological crises endanger lives. But the issue is about more than the lives of people or even all life forms on earth. It also touches the heart, the life of the Christian faith as such: When we as Christians confess our faith in the Creator God (as in Article 1 of the Apostolic Confession of Faith), we say that there is a special bond between God and created reality, therefore also between God and the earth, which is our home, and between God and the whole household of God on earth, which includes all forms of life.

The Bible writings tell us that **God stands in a relationship**

- with human individuals;
- with human communities (in Old Testament language it is often Israel and the so-called nations);
- as well as with the whole of creation, including what some eco-theologians call the whole community of earth, as we see it exemplified in the covenant with Noah, his descendants, all forms of life upon earth, and with the earth itself (Genesis 9:8-17).

Regarding **this wide view of creation** (God in relationship to all creatures) we see in the Bible, according to Walter Brueggemann, evidence of

- a blessed, fruitful, flourishing world;
- a world in danger of being destroyed; and
- a world beyond imminent destruction

The ***cosmic vision of Christ as person and of his redemptive work*** (cf. Colossians 1:13-20) runs on this track of creation, creation in danger of destruction, and creation renewed.

Against this background it is clear that ecology ministries in congregations **are at the heart of the Christian faith and the identity of Christian believers**. Ecology ministries are about more than yet another point on the agenda on congregational programmes that are already tough, or the special interest of a handful of members who draw inspiration from nature. An eco-theological window offers a vantage point from where all things related to being a church comes into view.

2. Historical overview: The development of eco-theology in the DR Church

The development of eco-theology within the DR Church is a process of awareness and theological intensification that began in the late 1990s and is still gaining momentum. Although the conversation was initially conducted sporadically, it developed over time to a clear commitment to integrate ecological justice with the missional call of the church

An important point of departure was the rediscovery of existing theological frameworks within the Christian and reformed tradition. This theological framework moves away from a human-centred theology that simply reduces creation to a

resource or a tool. The view that creation is solely meant for human use is not true to the Biblical testimony. Theologians like Ernst Conradie point out that the sabbath—as rest, sufficiency and worship—and not man, is the culmination of the story of creation. This theological reconsideration gradually made room for an eco-theological agenda in the DR Church. Various synodal documents illustrate this growth.

1998 – First Step

The General Synod acknowledges for the first time the church's historical silences about creation and calls for a re-evaluation of human 'sovereignty' as responsible stewardship rather than exploitation. The document warns against reducing the gospel to mere caring for souls, with little regard for the material reality of the world created and loved by God.

2007 – Prophecy above Profit

This report reacts to the Accra-confession (WARC) and places economic injustice and ecological destruction in the same moral framework. With this, the DR Church begins to acknowledge that environmental issues are not detached from structural poverty and inequality.

2013 – For the sake of the earth and her inhabitants

This framework, set up by the then Ecology Task Team, forms the first comprehensive attempt to integrate ecology with central aspects of the church's life: Understanding Scripture, Confession, Liturgy, Ethics, and Ministry. It remains the most complete ecological positioning of the DR Church as accepted by the General Synod.

2015 – The 'Green Synod'

The General Synod issued a call to simple lifestyles, the responsible management of resources, and practical change on all levels of the church. It emphasises the church's prophetic call against environmental injustice.

2019 – Deepening of the call

The 2019 report paid specific attention to South African realities like coal-dependency, water shortages, and energy-poverty. It describes three dimensions of the church's vocation: prophetic (witness), priestly (care and hope), and regal (responsible management of resources).

In summary, this development shows that the DR Church has increasingly acknowledged that eco-theology is neither a side-issue nor a specialist field but is integral to the gospel and the church's witness. This theological growth is the foundation on which the General Synod's Task Team for Ecology builds.

3. **Theological framework: Points of departure and commitment**

The DR Church is eager to join hands with faith communities worldwide who are pushing toward **sweeping reforms** aimed at how people rediscover and live out their participation and responsibilities within the household of God.

This commitment is not separated from the wider ecumenical movement. It ties in with the testimony of the South African Council of Churches and other local ecumenical partners, as well as with international bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), which since the Accra Confession (2004, cf. Section 2) has kept economic and ecological justice on the agenda.

With this commitment, the DR Church embraces a ***twofold, two-directional task***:

- *On the one hand,* to present familiar as well as rediscovered ecological wisdom within Christendom as a response to threats and injustice to environments, and
- *On the other hand*, to re-examine the Christian tradition itself, broadening and renewing it in the face of the environmental challenges and injustices of our time—also in the face of accusations of Christians' complicity in these injustices.

This commitment is most deeply grounded ***in believers' relationship to the triune God .***:

- The Creator God to whom people, together with the entire household of God, are indebted for the privilege of living in a world that fills us with awe;
- the Spirit, who renews all things and in whose force field we see that change is possible and that life can flourish anew;

- the Son, Jesus Christ, whose work of redemption is of cosmic magnitude.

This commitment calls the DR Church to **a task with prophetic and priestly dimensions**. Prophetically, the church participates in warnings against and unmasking of environmental injustices. The priestly testimony of the church is service where there is need for healing and hope.

The DR Church makes this commitment while we **confess that we are sometimes slow to see the direction in which the Spirit of God is leading us**, and that we often resist the need for such reform because of self-interest.
This commitment is further made with the knowledge that human-centredness is a great part of the problem. Therefore, we remind ourselves that people are part of the greater household of God, and this includes all forms of life, in fact, the whole earth as a system of life. All members of the household have intrinsic worth, and not mere utility value for people, and should be treated with respect.

In the story of the flood (Genesis 6-9), God thought of Noah and his family and of all surviving wild and tame animals. God reversed the devastation of the flood and made a covenant with Noah and his family, as well as with generations to come, as well as with all living beings who literally and figuratively were with them in the same boat—birds, tame animals, wild animals. In this story God bound together the fate of all forms of life.

Because all parts of God's household are interwoven, the DR Church realises that environmental; issues (the *green* agenda) and societal issues such as poverty and inequality (*social* issues) are not disconnected from one another. Therefore, the DR Church commits herself to what is called the **olive agenda**—a term offered to do justice to this interweaving of human needs and creation's worth as a whole.

The comprehensive reform, to which the DR Church wants to contribute, **touches each aspect of the church's work**:

- how we judge the church's history, but also rediscover wisdom there;
- how we understand Christian doctrine and symbols;
- how we make moral decisions;
- which virtues we emphasise and how we live out those virtues;
- how we understand our calling and faithfully live according to it;
- how congregations shape all their ministries (preaching and liturgy pastorate, teaching, etc.), including an ecology ministry.

Eco-theology can **enrich and deepen Christian tradition and doctrine** and *simultaneously gain from it*. In the process, eco-theology helps the church to shape a vision of faith in which

- all creation has inherent value, and God stands in a relationship to the whole community of earth;
- humanity is also expressed in service and responsibility;
- sin also means the breaking of ecological relationships;
- salvation is the healing of all creation;
- Christ is the centre of the cosmos;
- eschatology brings hope of renewal for the earth.

In this way, the gospel truly means good news for all creation.

For this, thoroughgoing investigation of the Bible is needed

- to, as stated above, enrich and deepen Christian tradition and church doctrine;
- to contribute meaningfully to public discussions about ecological issues, which are interwoven with other societal problems;
- to be able to answer accusations that beliefs, and the Bible also, are centred on humanity and therefore contribute to many people's unconcern about environmental matters.
- because it should be an important aspect of eco-spirituality.

It is the responsibility of congregants of the DR Church to listen critically but respectfully to the results of an eco-theological study of the Bible; to keep on asking what aims and reading strategies undergird those results; and to be able to account for the aims, reading strategies, and results of their own (eoc-theological) reading of the Bible.

With these thoughts as a point of departure, this theological framework serves as **an invitation** to congregants of the DR Church to work **with other faith communities, and with groups who examine reality in other ways**, to live out and celebrate their participation in the household of God.

4. Eco-spirituality, wonder, and awe.

The Bible offers a surprising wealth of material that shines light on aspects of eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality can be explored and practised from many angles. One of these is *an attitude of wonder and awe* as a point of departure. When we as Christian believers encounter the greatness, complexity, and intrinsic worth of all creation, it can urge us towards a deepening of our relationship with the Creator God, as well as to a revaluation of our network of relationships with other members of the earth community. Wonder and awe can strike root in our lives in many ways:

- It serves as a call to worship, celebration, witness, and praise (also in ecumenical context, and further with non-human fellow creatures from the whole community of earth, all in their own ways (cf. Psalm 19:1-6; Psalm 96:11-13; Isaiah 55:10-13).
- It opens doors to living with more appreciation, humility, gratitude, benevolence, compassion and receptivity.
- It makes room for experiences of shalom-unity and therapeutic healing.
- It serves as an invitation to observing with attention (cf. Matthew 6:25-34: 'See the birds of heaven'; 'See the lilies of the field') and in this way it makes us more receptive to discovery, contact, and participation.
- And, importantly, it urges us to advocacy.

Some remarks on wonder, awe, and eco-spirituality and how they are related to the above:

- Advocacy reminds us that wonder and awe should not be reduced to sentimentality where responsibility stays out of sight.
- Some see the road of wonder as a central element of eco-spirituality more or less in this way:
  See and experience → wonder → be awed → praise→ belong → love and care → advocacy.
- Or, in more theological language: Wonder happens when one stands in awe before the Creator God while one is in the midst of experiencing creation as a gift, a mystery, a complex whole, which helps us to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of everything in creation, to discover our

own share in creation and having earth for a home, and to respond with gratitude, openness, compassion, and responsibility.

5. Eco-theology and present concerns: Water

Eco-theology urges faith communities to contribute, with reference to the Bible, to discussions about community issues. The issue of water can serve as an example. A study of the water-motif in the Bible yields surprising perspectives**— on the one hand about what is said about water, on the other, how water is used as a metaphor to speak about other societal issues and about faith as such.**

First, one soon realises that water in the Bible is much more than one item on a list of resources that people have access to. **Water is a matter of life and death.**

- The creation stories in Genesis 1 en 2, and the flood story in Genesis 6-9, tell us that water is essential, but that it can also be life-threatening. In the Bible as a whole we find that water is life-giving and that it can serve to purify, renew, and bless. Yet water also causes people to drown, soil to erode, and to destroy things when it comes in full force.
- The tension between destructive and life-giving water we also encounter in the book of Psalms. Psalm 104 uses water language to refer to things against which God protects us (verses 6-9) as well as to tell how God provides and sustains life (verses 10-15). Psalm 65 echoes these experiences of water. On the one hand God is trusted to silence the roaring of the seas and their waves. Threatening, tumultuous seas are an image for nations threatening (verses 6-9). On the other hand, God makes sure that the soil remains wet and that harvests thrive, so that everyone and everything depending on them can flourish (verses 10-14; cf. Deut. 11:14).
- The story of the exodus from Egypt also shows how water can serve to save some and destroy others (Exodus 13:17-14:31).

After the episode at the Reed Sea, in the wilderness**, a lack of water drives the nation to despair**. Moses realises that the people are on the verge of stoning him. He then asks God for help, who then provides water from a rock. A shortage of water made the people ask whether God was still in their midst or not. (Ex 17:1-7). Also,

when the people grumbled at Mara about the bitter and undrinkable water (Ex 15:22-25), the Lord made the water drinkable.

Water crises (too much, too dirty, or too little water) and abundant, living water are connected in the Bible to **God's punishment, a need for God's salvation, or proof of God's blessing.** For instance, God punishes the Egyptians with the first of the ten plagues when he changes water into blood (Exodus 7). Experiences of water provide the language used by a poet to utter the need for God's salvation (Ps 69:1), of talk about God's blessing (Ps 1:1-3), and in this way people's dependence on God is expressed (Ps. 69:10-14; Is 41:17-18).

The link between water pollution and social injustice is strikingly illustrated in the book Ezekiel. Leaders and the powerful in society are like sheep that enjoy the good grazing and clean drinking water before the other sheep but then trample and dirty it so that nothing is left for the remainder of the flock. (Ezekiel 34:17-19).That which also sustains the life of fellow creatures is despised.

The New Testament picks up on with the idea of life-giving water. At a well, in Jesus' mouth, words about water become **living water** which causes people never to thirst again, and which wells up to eternal life. (Joh 4:14; cf. also Joh 7:37-38).

At the **Christian baptism** the water reminds us of both life and rebirth (Rom. 6:3-4), the gateway to a new way of life—a rebirth much needed by humanity today if we want to overcome our self-created work of destruction.

The water motif in the Bible runs very wide. Water becomes a symbol of both **creation and destruction, life and death, purification and renewal, judgment and blessing**, and it affects the whole, interwoven household of God.

This motif meanders from the great, life-giving river in Genesis 2, a river that irrigates a garden and branches out to other parts of the earth, to the river in Revelation 22—crystal clear water of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. Everywhere along this route we keep seeing, however, that life-giving rivers can also threaten lives, either by overpowering living beings or by becoming dirty, or by drying up.

The DR Church calls upon congregants as part of the household of God to choose life and to cherish their relationship with the One who bestows living water.