

# **Integrating the Sabbath, the Health Message, and Ubuntu as a Response to the Ecological Crises: A South African Seventh-day Adventist Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This study is situated in the intersections between systematic theology and Christian ecotheology. It seeks to bring into dialogue the current ecological situation in South Africa with two Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, namely, the Sabbath and the health message in tandem with the African notion of *ubuntu* as a possibility of probing an ecological ethos and praxis in the Seventh-day Adventist church in the context of South Africa and beyond. On this basis, this paper offers an explication of the Seventh-day Adventist “Fundamental Beliefs,” the contributions that the Seventh-day Adventist church can make to Christian ecotheology, the South African situation and lastly the significance of the doctrine of the health message, Sabbath and *ubuntu* as response(s) to the current ecological crises. This study will contribute to the growth of ecotheology within the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa.

## Keywords

Ecotheology, fundamental beliefs, health message, Seventh-day Adventist Church, sabbath, systematic theology, ubuntu

## Introduction

The emergence of Christian ecotheology is partly due to concerns over the global ecological crises. Ernst Conradie maintains that Christian ecotheology can arguably be a Christian critique of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Such an environmental critique of Christianity was famously expressed in an essay by Lynn White Jr, who argued that “Christianity is profoundly anthropocentric and that the notion of exercising dominion over nature in medieval Christianity encouraged control over nature, so Christianity remains deeply implicated in ecological destruction”.<sup>2</sup> Christian ecotheology could indeed be regarded as a response to Lynn White’s essay. In the text, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: A Research Guide* (2006), Conradie underscores the significance of Christian ecotheology in the following manner:

*“Ecological theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustices. At the same*

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1 Ernst Conradie, “The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate,” *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (February 2020): 4.

2 L. Junior White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1204.

time, it is an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis. Just as feminist theology engages in a twofold critique, that is, a Christian critique of sexist or patriarchal culture and a feminist critique of Christianity, so ecological theologies offer a Christian critique of the cultural habits underlying ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity. In other words, ecological theology is not only concerned with how Christianity can respond to environmental concerns; it also offers Christianity an opportunity for renewal and reformation.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the contextual nature of Christian ecotheology, I define with Tomren:

*“Ecotheology is a theology developed to motivate individuals to engage in ecological sustainability. Ecotheology includes systematic theology, environmental ethics, practical theology, and environmental politics. The concept is normative and interdisciplinary.”*<sup>4</sup>

This paper is, therefore, a dialogue between Christian ecotheology, systematic theology, and African Indigenous knowledge system with a special focus on the notion of

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3 Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2006).

4 Tom S. Tomren, ‘Foreword’, in *Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions*, ed. Louk A. Andrianos and Tom S. Tomren (Latvia: Livonia Print, 2021), 32.

*ubuntu*. The main question to assess here is how South African Adventism can respond to the ongoing ecological crises.

Christian ecotheology touches on all the traditional subdisciplines of Christian theology, including rereading the biblical texts, revisiting the history of Christianity, examining the content and significance of the Christian faith and a Christian ethos, reflecting on Christian praxis, on the church and its many ministries, on God's mission in church and society, and on the relations between Christianity and other religious tradition. Systematic theology, therefore, forms one crucial dimension of ecotheology, albeit alongside several others. Accordingly, ecotheology cannot be reduced to creation theology, anthropology (the relationship between human beings and the rest of nature), the ecological impact of human sin, or environmental ethics only. It touches on every aspect of the Christian faith, including God's work of creation,<sup>5</sup> ongoing creation, providence, salvation, the formation of the church,<sup>6</sup> its ministries and missions, and the consummation of God's work.<sup>7</sup> It also touches on the person of God, God's transcendence and

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5 T.S. Tomren, 'Foreword', in *Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions*, ed. L.A. Andrianos and T.S. Tomren (Latvia: Livonia Print, 2021), 23--32.

6 C.W. Ayre and Ernst Conradie, eds., *The Church in God's Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016).

7 See Ernst Conradie, *Hope for the Earth: Vistas on a New Century*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Sigurd Bergmann, *Eschatology as Imagining the End* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

immanence, the person and work of Jesus Christ<sup>8</sup> and the Holy Spirit,<sup>9</sup> and on the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

On this basis, this paper discusses the contributions that have been/can be made in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDAC) on Christian ecotheology. To assess Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) ecotheology in the context of South Africa, a careful analysis of the ecological situation in South Africa, African concepts such as *ubuntu*, doctrines, ethos, and spirituality of the SDAC is required. Hence, this paper begins with a brief outline of the significance of the 28 fundamental beliefs held by the SDSV. Second, I discuss the distinct contributions made by the SDAC in addressing the ongoing ecological crises. Third, I outline the current ecological situation in South Africa. Fourth, I illustrate how the African concept of *ubuntu* and two SDA fundamental beliefs, namely (1) Christian behaviour and the (2) Sabbath, carry an ecological ethos and praxis. Last, I offer some concluding remarks.

## Brief History of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs

Unlike other denominations, the SDAC is not guided by creeds or articles of faith but by its 28 “Fundamental Beliefs” (FB). The history of the FB dates back to 1872 when

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8 See Denis Edwards, ‘The Church as Sacrament of Relationships’, *Pacifica* 8, no. 2 (1995): 185–200.

9 See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992); Sigurd Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

10 See Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart That Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

the “Declaration of the Fundamental Principles”, taught and practiced by the SDAC was accepted by its General Conference. However, the FB were systematically developed from 1849–1887 and were already formulated before the formal inception of the SDAC. Upon the inception of the SDAC, only 25 such principles were in existence. It was in 1931 when these “principles” were renamed to the FB of the SDAC.<sup>11</sup> Following minor revisions at the 1980 General Conference, two beliefs on lifestyle, namely on “Baptism” and “Christian behaviour” were added, while a further statement on “Growing in Christ” was added at the 2015 General Conference.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the FB are divided into 28 paragraphs. In the SDAC Manual, the significance of these fundamental beliefs is explicated in the following manner:

*“Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teachings of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truths or find better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”<sup>13</sup>*

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11 Michael W. Campbell, ‘Seventh-Day Adventism, Doctrinal Statements, and Unity’, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27, no. 1 (2016): 99.

12 Campbell, “Seventh-Day Adventism,” 98-111.

13 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, ‘Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual: (19th Ed.)’ (Silver Spring: The Secretariat, 2015), 162.

In the SDAC, the FB are a “synopsis of faith and identity.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Kwabena Donkor notes that these 28 FB function in three ways in the SDAC, namely: (1) they describe the content of what SDAs believe in, (2) they reflect a consensus within the SDAC on truth, (3) and they ground the mission of the church.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the SDAC maintains a protestant “conviction” of *sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone), so that the 28 fundamental beliefs reflect how the SDAC interprets Scripture. Currently, in the church manual of the SDAC, these fundamental beliefs are categorized in the following order: (1) God, (2) man, (3) salvation, (4) the church, (5) daily Christian life, and (6) restoration.

Having offered this brief historical overview of the SDAC, I now present the contributions made by the SDAC to ecotheology.

### **Seventh-day Adventists’ Contributions to Christian Ecotheology**

The current ecological crisis, associated with devastating floods from deforested hills, loss of species, land degradation, depletion of energy resources, climate change, and so forth calls for a theological reflection and intervention from all Christian traditions, including the SDAC. In the foreword of the edited volume by Kapyia J.

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14 T.N. Nkuna, ‘The Relevance of the Messianic Dimension for the Christological Controversy in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church’ (Master Thesis, North-West University, 2021), 12.

15 Kwabena Donkor, ‘Why a Statement of Beliefs?’, *Perspective Digest* 11, no. 3 (2006): 17.

Koama entitled, *Christian Care in Christian Mission*, Thabo Magoba notes:

*“The ramifications of our ecological crises present the most urgent moral issue of our day, and time is of the essence in addressing it. We cannot claim to love God while watching the earth being destroyed.”*<sup>16</sup>

Considering that the current ecological crises have had a profoundly harmful impact on the world, the SDAC has a moral obligation and responsibility to intervene in the current environmental crises. Ezra Chitando, reflecting on the ecological crises from an “African perspective”, furthers this point and argues, “To ask God to intervene, without calling upon human beings to take corrective action, is to renege on responsibility.”<sup>17</sup> However, Celia-Deane Drummond cautions us that we must “strike a balance between exaggerating these ecological threats as total devastation (apocalypse) and a pretense that more technology will solve all ecological problems.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, I contend that Christian ecotheology has to be contextually taking its cue from how we have treated the environment in the past, present, and how we will treat it in the future. In

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16 Thabo Magoba, ‘Foreword’, in *Creation Care in Creation Mission*, ed. Kapya A. Kaoma (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015), xii.

17 Ezra Chitando, ‘Ecotheology in Africa: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment’, in *Law, Religion and the Environment in Africa*, ed. M. Christian Green and Muhammed Haron (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, n.d.), 10.

18 Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1996), 1.



this regard, Ernst Conradie argues as follows that Christian ecotheology is indeed a contextual theology:

*“Ecological theology may be regarded as the next wave of contextual theology. It joins liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, and various Indigenous theologies in the quest for a theology that can respond to the challenges of our time. While all theologies reflect the contexts within which they are situated, contextual theologies are, for better or for worse, attempts to articulate and address their social contexts self-consciously and explicitly.”*<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere in his essay entitled “The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate”, he notes:

*“Christian ecotheology offers a dual critique, namely both an ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction. Without a critique of Christianity, it becomes an apologetic exercise that overlooks the need for a radical ecological reformation of Christianity and merely reiterates human responsibility towards the environment through notions of stewardship or priesthood. Without a Christian critique of ecological destruction, ecotheology loses its ability to offer any distinct contribution to wider debates. Ecotheology then becomes nothing more than one branch of “religion*

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19 Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology*, 1.

*and ecology” and cannot avoid the traps of self-secularization.”*<sup>20</sup>

Most Christian traditions have contributed to Christian ecotheology through various means. Despite the minimal contribution to Christian ecotheology, the SDAC, like all denominations, has a significant role to play in the current ecotheological discourse. On this point, in the year 2008, the former General Conference President, Jan Paulsen, encouraged more discourse on ecotheology. Although such a call was made by the then president of the SDAC, no institution, department, or leader has been appointed to address this issue as yet.

It is worth noting that there have been some recent scholarly interventions by SDA theologians in this regard. For instance, Norman Gulley, one of the leading SDA theologians, in his book *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation* writes briefly about ecotheology and the ecological crises. He holds that in the face of the current ecological turmoil, a “biblical ecology” is needed.<sup>21</sup> He refers to the following biblical texts: Col 1:15–20; John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:6; Eph 1:9–10; Heb 1:2–3; and Rom 8. At the heart of his proposed “biblical ecology” is the care that God has for all his creatures in the world which Christians should mirror. On this basis, Gulley maintains that ecotheology should be grounded in Jesus Christ as the Creator and Redeemer of the cosmos.<sup>22</sup> He argues that redemption is pivotal and does not

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20 Conradie, “Four Tasks,” 3.

21 Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation* (Vol. 3) (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2012), 105.

22 Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 105–106.

benefit humans only but all of creation. However, he adds that, “restoration of humans and all creation includes more than this world.”<sup>23</sup> This indicates the significance of eschatology within the SDA tradition.

Sivge Tonstad, in his unpublished conference paper entitled, “COVID-19: ‘Crisis of Ecology and Hermeneutics,’” notes that the SDAC is earth-oriented in its ethos.<sup>24</sup> However, such ethos, spirituality, and theology have not yet been fully expanded in an ecological sense. In this regard he notes:

*“Seventh-day Adventists are interested in the earth, but has the interest brought benefits to ecology? Our focus has been on whether the earth was created, when, and how long it took to make it. These are worthwhile interests, but do they benefit the earth? The age of the earth in the Adventist community mattered more than the ache of the earth, and the priority persists even as the groaning of non-human creation gets louder and more insistent. It persists, I say, even though the Bible does not specify precisely when the earth was created. What it does, by contrast, is to prescribe our duty to care for the earth.”*<sup>25</sup>

Given this ecological responsibility, interestingly, contributions by SDA theologians from Africa remain limited because there are no postgraduate theses, monographs, or edited volumes on ecotheology from within the SDA

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<sup>23</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Sivge Tonstad, “COVID-19: ‘Crisis of Ecology and Hermeneutics,’” 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Tonstad, “COVID-19,” 9-10.

tradition. At the moment, the SDAC does not endorse any unique position on Christian ecotheology. Still, the theological/doctrinal views of the SDAC may offer some distinct perspectives in this regard. To demonstrate that some doctrines of the SDAC may contribute to ecotheological discourses, I will consider two fundamental beliefs: The SDA Health Message and the Sabbath. I will not engage a theological or biblical exposition of these two fundamental beliefs. Instead, I will reflect on how, considering the current ecological demise, these two fundamental beliefs can be significant perspectives that the SDAC can utilize for contributing to ecotheology in Africa.

### **The Ecological Crises in South Africa**

Colonialism and apartheid remain two paramount historical factors that have shaped the history of South Africa (nature and humanity). In conformity with this view, Hlulisani Ramatswana, in his essay entitled, “Not Free While Nature Remains Colonized: A Decolonial Reading of Isaiah 11:6–9”, observes that the “colonial system disrupted the harmony that existed between human beings and nature by colonising both, thereby causing a divide between human beings and nature.”<sup>26</sup> Despite South Africa being characterized as being a post-colonial and post-apartheid state, the effects of colonialism and apartheid are still evident in almost all aspects of the country. At an environmental level these effects may be characterized by

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26 Hlulisani Ramantswana, ‘Not Free While Nature Remains Colonised: A Decolonial Reading of Isaiah 11: 6--9’, *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 3 (2015): 807.

the scarcity of clean water, proper sanitation facilities, and so on. For instance, in the townships I grew up in Khayelitsha and rural areas, the scarcity of clean drinking water goes back to forced removals under apartheid, which led to overpopulation and, thus, to soil erosion and the exhaustion of water supplies. As a result, many underprivileged people resorted to poaching and forms of deforestation as survival strategies. This, in turn, caused further ecological damage and, thus, exacerbating the vicious ecological destructive cycle. However, at a larger scale, within the Southern Africa region, it can be noted:

*“The sub-continent is already under pressure from climate stresses; with further climate change, climate in the region is predicted to become more variable and extreme weather events such as droughts and floods are predicted to become more frequent and severe. Southern Africa is particularly vulnerable to climatic changes and variability because of the fact that the majority of the population makes their living from the land as cultivators and pastoralists.”<sup>27</sup>*

In this regard, Ezra Chitando observes that because of the very real threats that African people are facing, African theologians and scholars of religion have sought to address the issue of the environmental crisis.<sup>28</sup> One of the biggest motivating factors for this engagement is that African theology seeks to be contextually sensitive, while unearthing

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27 Michael B.K. Darkoh, ‘An Overview of Environmental Issues in Southern Africa’, *African Journal of Ecology* 47, no. 1 (2009): 93.

28 Chitando, “Ecotheology in Africa,” 4.

some fundamental African indigenous knowledge as a praxis to answer life threatening situations, such as the ecological crisis. Having briefly outlined the current ecological situation in South Africa, I now discuss the concept of *ubuntu* amid the ongoing ecological crises.

## Ubuntu Amid the Ongoing Ecological Crises

*Umntu Ngumntu Ngabantu* is a Xhosa adage that is found in all Indigenous languages in South Africa. This adage can be translated as, “to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and on that basis establish humane relations with them.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the notion of *ubuntu* is built on being “humane” (being respectful, caring, gentle, and so on) towards other human beings. On this point, Puleng LenKaBula argues that when the concept of *ubuntu* is interpreted in a creative way – which acknowledges its socio-economic, political, and ecological scope or horizon– it has the potential to become a resource, principle, and norm for overcoming ecological degradation and economic injustices in the world today.<sup>30</sup> This is based on this notion of being “humane” or *ukubano-Buntu*, as this notion encompasses the idea of “interconnectedness.” In this regard Ramose argues:

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29 Mogobe Ramose, ‘Ecology Through Ubuntu’, in *African Ethics: An Anthology for Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyara F. Murove (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 72.

30 Puleng LenkaBula, ‘Beyond Anthropocentricity: Botho/Ubuntu and the Quest for Economic and Ecological Justice in Africa’, *Religion and Theology* 15, no. 3–4 (2008): 375.

*“The principle of wholeness applies also to the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined. Moreover, human beings are indeed part and parcel of physical nature, even though they might be a privileged part at that.”<sup>31</sup>*

It is this wholeness embedded in the concept of *ubuntu* that postures African ideas of being to extend beyond humans to the environment.

### **The Significance of the SDA Health Message**

The SDAC is distinguished not only by its eschatological emphasis on the Second Advent of Jesus Christ and Sabbath observance but also for its commitment to promoting a healthy lifestyle. This is unequivocally articulated in a statement by the SDA General Conference, which posits, “the health reform and teaching of health and temperance are inseparable of the church’s mission and message.”<sup>32</sup> Currently, the SDA health message is subsumed under the church’s “fundamental belief 22: Christian behaviour,” which underscores the significance of a healthy lifestyle in Christian living. The following is an excerpt:

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31 Ramose, “Ecology Through Ubuntu,” 73.

32 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, “Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual,” 168.

*“We are called to be godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with biblical principles in all aspects of personal and social life. For the Spirit to recreate the character of our Lord in us, we involve ourselves only in those things that will produce Christlike purity, health, and joy in our lives. This means that our amusement and entertainment should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty. While recognizing cultural differences, our dress is to be simple, modest, and neat, befitting those whose true beauty does not consist of outward adornment but in the imperishable ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit. It also means that because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we are to care for them intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, we are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures. Since alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and the irresponsible use of drugs and narcotics are harmful to our bodies, we are to abstain from them as well. Instead, we are to engage in whatever brings our thoughts and bodies into the discipline of Christ, who desires our wholesomeness, joy, and goodness.”<sup>33</sup>*

According to this excerpt, Christian behaviour entails a lifestyle characterised by a “most healthful” diet, daily exercise, and abstinence from alcohol and tobacco. On this point, Rachel Wells, in her essay entitled “Why care for the

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33 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, “Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual,” 168.



earth If it is going to burn? Eschatology and Ecology”, argues that “a plant-based diet is one of the very best things humans can do for animals vegan saves the lives of at least ninety-five animals per year.”<sup>34</sup> In examining the SDA’s emphasis on dietary habits, Tonstad notes:

*“Food choices have a role in Adventist theology and practice, ranging from the observance of Old Testament dietary laws to preference for plant-based food, the former an ethical obligation for Adventists all over the world, the latter optional, and the choice of a minority. The hermeneutic grounding these choices is either obedience to a still-binding prescription or personal health advantages. The reason, conspicuously, is not ecological. Should it be? Or rather, shouldn’t it be? Food production and food choices are possibly the most important determinants of global warming.”*<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, a vegetarian or, better, a vegan diet is indeed a crucial step in caring for creation. Seventh-day Adventists, through decades, have understood this through the many writings of Ellen White on this subject. For instance, in the book, *The Ministry of Health and Healing*, she argues, “Think of the cruelty to animals that meat eating involves, and its effects on those that inflict and those who behold it. How it destroys the tenderness with which we

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34 A. Rachel Wells, ‘Why Care for the Earth If It Is All Going to Burn?’, in *Eschatology and Ecology: Eschatology from an Adventist Perspective*, ed. Elias B. de Souza et al., vol. 1 (Silver Springs: Biblical Research, 2021), 23.

35 Tonstad, COVID-19, 6.

should regard these creatures of God.”<sup>36</sup> This is further expressed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Believe Volume*, in which it states that “by abstaining from unclean foods, God’s people demonstrate their gratefulness, for their redemption, from the corrupt unclean world.”<sup>37</sup> On this point, Joshua Méndez notes:

*“By grounding the health message in the ethical, affirming a vegetarian diet as a crucial element of Christian behavior is a powerful first step in a relational model of Creation that abandons the species, anthropocentric confines. The health message lures us into a space that transforms the pre-existing hierarchies between human creatures and animals by suggesting a relational component that extends individual moral actions beyond human subjectivity.”*<sup>38</sup>

Despite the SDA’s emphasis on diet and healthy living, the ecotheological expression that might be found in this doctrine has not yet been sufficiently explored. On this point, Tonstad holds that “the traditional Seventh-day Adventist health message should be explored not only to address dietary habits but also to emphasise ecological intervention that may come from the Seventh-day Adventist

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36 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Health and Healing* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 47.

37 *Seventh-Day Adventist Believe* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), 283.

38 Joshua Méndez, ‘Dreaming Beyond the Flesh: Toward a Relational Adventist Ecotheology for a Global Age’ (Adventist Society for Religious Studies Conference, San Antonio, 2016), 4.

Church.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, I contend, a closer look at the SDA health message probes a theological and ethical commitment to caring for God’s creation.

Suffice to note that the SDA health message is not only concerned with dietary habits but also addresses an “irreducible spiritual dimension.”<sup>40</sup> This is expressed in the call to abandon living in cities and opt to live in the outskirts of cities. At the heart of this call is the realization that, “one of the causes of the ongoing ecological crises is overpopulation caused by urbanization.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Rizal Abdi and Ferry Pardamean observe that “cities are often health hazards. This is associated with visible diseases, foul air, impure food, impure water, overcrowding, unhealthy living conditions.”<sup>42</sup> According to Wells, living on the outskirts of the city grounds humanity into a realization that “other living creatures are co-inhabitants of the world with humans.”<sup>43</sup> White extends a similar view and notes how nature assists humans:

*“Through the agencies of nature, God is working, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, to keep us alive, to build up and restore us. When any part of the body sustains injury, a healing process is at once begun; nature’s agencies set at work to restore*

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39 Tonstad, „COVID-19,” 3.

40 Méndez, “Dreaming Beyond the Flesh,” 2.

41 M. Rizal Abdi and Ferry Goodman Pardamean, ‘Christianity and Ecology a Critical Study on the Contribution of SDA Theology toward Ecology’, Jurnal Kawistara 8, no. 3 (2019): 283.

42 Rizal and Pardamean, “Christianity and Ecology,” 284.

43 Wells, “Why Care for the Earth,” 24.

*soundness. However, the power working through these agencies is the power of God.”<sup>44</sup>*

Given this understanding, human beings and other creatures are intertwined and consequently, interdependent. This is the theological framework that is needed in the SDA health message. The ecological crises present a unique opportunity for the SDAC to redefine and re-emphasize the SDAC’s health message through this relationality lens, which may indeed lure us into a space that enables Adventists to move beyond pre-existing hierarchies between human creatures and animals by suggesting “a relational component that extends individual moral actions beyond human subjectivity.”<sup>45</sup>

### **The Significance of Sabbath-Keeping within the SDAC as an Ecological Ethos**

In an article entitled “Adventism and the World: Toward an Adventist Theology of Solidarity”, Silakhe Singata notes that the Ten Commandments within the SDAC are understood dually, i.e., (1) the love for God and (2) the love for other fellow human beings. In his view, the Sabbath commandment is understood amongst SDAs as a bridge that connects the love humans ought to have towards God and the love that humans ought to have for fellow humans and

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44 White, Ministry of Health and Healing, 21.

45 Méndez, “Dreaming Beyond the Flesh,” 7.

creation in its entirety.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the SDA's Church Manual introduces the Sabbath in the following manner:

*“After the six days of Creation, the gracious Creator rested on the seventh day and instituted the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation. The fourth commandment of God’s unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship, and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of delightful communion with God and one another. It symbolizes our redemption in Christ, a sign of our sanctification, a token of our allegiance, and a foretaste of our eternal future in God’s kingdom. The Sabbath is God’s perpetual sign of His eternal covenant between Him and His people. Joyful observance of this holy time from evening to evening, sunset to sunset, is a celebration of God’s creative and redemptive acts.”<sup>47</sup>*

The Sabbath in the SDAC is presently understood through a soteriological and eschatological lens. Thus, the significance of the Sabbath remains restricted to benefit humanity. On this basis, I agree with Méndez who underscored the Sabbath as a day of “communion” between God and every creature in God’s household. For instance, he argues, “For humans to enter into the Sabbath rest, the

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46 Silakhe Singata, ‘Adventism and the World: Towards an Adventist Theology of Solidarity’, 2018, 2.

47 General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, “Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual,” 179.

relationship they have with the rest of creation must be taken into account.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Tonstad notes:

*“We have taught the world which day to keep, when it begins and ends, and what not to do on the Sabbath, but we have said very little about its communal and ecological character. The communal prescription for the Sabbath includes benefit to animals (Exod. 20:8–11; 23:12; Deut. 5:12–15), and the prescription for the Sabbath Year promises relief to animals and the earth Exod. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:2–3.”*<sup>49</sup>

As proposed by Tonstad, this communal imperative can potentially reverse the damages meted out by capitalism to the body and the rest of creation. Just like the health message, the Sabbath implies relationality with nature. By interpreting the Sabbath through this concept of relationality as proposed by the SDAC’s Manual, the Sabbath can be redefined as a hermeneutical key the SDAC can use to relate with creation in a life-affirming manner.<sup>50</sup> Leonardo Boff better explains this relationality in his text *Ecology and Liberation* (1995), by arguing, “From an ecological viewpoint, everything co-exists. Everything that co-exists pre-exists. And everything that co-exists and pre-exists subsists using an infinite web of all-inclusive relations. Nothing exists outside relationships.”<sup>51</sup> (Boff 1995:7). Given this

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48 Méndez, “Dreaming Beyond the Flesh,” 8.

49 Tonstad, “COVID-19,” 5.

50 Tonstad, “COVID-19,” 6.

51 Leonardo Boff, *Ecology & Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 7.

understanding of ecology, from an Adventist perspective, the question becomes, how can the doctrine of the Sabbath advance such an ecological ethos and spirituality? For instance, in the context of South Africa in particular, in most black SDACs, the whole Sabbath day is spent in church buildings, where minimal interaction with nature is practised. However, Ellen White long advised that on the Sabbath, humans ought to interact with nature. In this regard, she argues, “To keep the Sabbath holy, we do not need to enclose ourselves in walls, shut away from beautiful scenes of nature and from the free, invigorating air of heaven.”<sup>52</sup> The Sabbath allows all creation in God’s household to reconcile. As Joshua Méndez profoundly argues:

*“The Sabbath attempts to resolve the human/nature dualism by extending rest to animals and the land. In keeping with the spirit of Leviticus, I advocate for a rest that disrupts the linear cycles of production and engenders the transformation and renewal of the whole of Creation through the weekly experience of the Sabbath.”<sup>53</sup>*

Through the Sabbath rest creation (human and non-human) has an opportunity to experience the interconnectedness of all things and, most significantly, the presence of God. This was also profoundly captured by Abraham Heschel:

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52 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 66.

53 Méndez, “Dreaming Beyond the Flesh,” 8.

*“To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we should not use the instruments that have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for Man’s progress than the Sabbath?”<sup>54</sup>*

The SDAC can explore the Sabbath from this premise and arrive at a point wherein the members can claim that the Sabbath is “a day which we are called to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, the weekly Sabbath arrives to disrupt and transform human time, and the violence it imposes to the poor and the environment. Thus, the Sabbath awards nature an opportunity to transcend the material to experience interdependence with all living things, the land they occupy, and, most importantly, to be in God’s presence.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to provide the significance of the 28 fundamental beliefs of the SDAC, its contributions to

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54 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath* (London: MacMillan, 1951), 12.

55 Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 23.



Christian ecotheology, and an ecotheological examination of the notion of *ubuntu*, the SDAC health message and the Sabbath. The current ecological crisis presents a *kairos* moment for the SDAC. As stated above, by discarding anthropocentric interpretations of *ubuntu*, the health message, and the Sabbath, the SDAC in South Africa may indeed develop a theological language emphasizing the relationality and interdependence of all creation in “God’s Household”. Accordingly, this paper brought to light the following questions: What is the role of the SDCA in responding to the current ecological crises? How can the doctrines of the SDA Church be expanded to address the environmental challenges that severely impact the poor and marginalized communities? I agree with Méndez<sup>56</sup> that the SDAC can no longer afford to remain restricted by the anthropocentric confines of our theological language when its underlying truths offer a profound alternative — a relational, holistic vision for creation.

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56 Méndez, “Dreaming Beyond the Flesh,” 12.

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