

Enhancing Environmental Stewardship through the Church's Curriculum

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Abstract: The church as an organisation should be the light of the world. Being the light means that the church will be example for the world in the way to act as an organization, react and do things for others to follow. One area where the church needs to be the light is in the area of being stewards of the environment God has given to man. The earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1) and other scriptural passage has been used severally in the church to pray in claiming blessings from God. It is high time that the same passage be used to motivate members of the church to keep, nurture and protect the environment from decay and destruction. The various curriculum materials of the church have emphasized the issue of stewardship, churches also observe stewardship week with so much emphasis on money and giving. However, the issue of environmental stewardship has not been given prominence. It is high time that churches gave attention to stewardship of the environment and also teach members how to be good stewards of the environment that God has given to them. Some of the ways by which the church can enhance environmental stewardship among members of the church are by creating awareness among church members, teaching environmental stewardship, inclusion of environmental stewardship in the church curriculum, mobilizing church members for environmental care etc. when the church takes the responsibility of keeping the environment in the front burner, members will also see the importance on their lives, health and the environment and live it for others to see and emulate.

Keywords: Environmental Stewardship, Church Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

It was a raining night and when people woke up it was difficult to get out of the house because the whole environment has become flooded due to blocked drainage. God created the world and gave man everything he would ever need for sustenance and for living a good life. God gave man land, vegetation, forest, trees, ocean, lakes, etc. so that man would not be in need of anything. God also gave man the instruction to multiply on the earth which he has been given. However, all that God has given to man has been mishandled and in some cases destroyed because of carelessness and inability to care for all that God has given to man. The aim of this paper is to examine environmental stewardship and suggest how it can be enhanced through the implementation of the church curriculum. This paper will therefore discuss stewardship, environmental stewardship, biblical principles for environmental stewardship, church curriculum, and ways the church curriculum can be used to enhance environmental stewardship.

Stewardship

The word stewardship refers to the duties and obligations of a servant. It is a biblical concept rooted in the belief that everyone created by God has been blessed by God with certain talents, gifts, abilities, resources and opportunities which must be nurtured and developed for own good and the good of humanity. The complete Dictionary for Home, School, and Office (1997) define stewardship as the act of fulfilling the duties of a steward [1]. It is the acknowledgement of God's ownership, the acceptance of trusteeship of life and possessions, and the administration of the same according to the will of God [2]. The stewardship duty is carried out by man who is referred to as the steward, created by God and who has been given all things by God freely.

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A steward is one who cares for the property of or business of another, an owner. Stewards do not have ownership but are responsible for appropriate care or management of the property or business of the owner [3]. Man (*the church*) has been given the environment where he lives. Thus, man (*the church*) has the responsibility to care and nurture the environment where he lives as a manager of God's property entrusted into his hands. The church must teach members that everything man has is a gift from God, that man must be grateful for the gifts he receive from God, that man has responsibility to share his gifts with others, that man must ask God for guidance in using his gifts, that man must turn away from materialism and that true joy is found in good stewardship. This teaching should also go beyond emphasizing tithes, money or possessions, time, influence, talent, and abilities [4].

Environmental Stewardship

Environment, according to the Complete Christian Dictionary for Home, School and Office [5] is "the natural surrounding or social condition in which people live". The Dictionary of Geographical Terms define the environment as "the sum total of all the external conditions which may act upon and organism or community or influence its development or existence". According to the Evangelical Environment Network, the environment is God's creation and human beings are an integral part of it. Since human beings who are an integral part of God's creation has been given the responsibility of care, nurture of the environment, it means that man will give account of how the environment is used or misused.

Environmental stewardship is the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose actions affect the environment [6]. This responsibility is a shared one by everyone living in the environment. This include the church and every member of the church. For the military, environmental stewardship is the integration and application of environmental values into the military mission in order to sustain readiness, improve quality of life, strengthen civil relations, and preserve valuable natural resources [7]. The church cannot do less being the light of the world. The church should be in the fore front of teaching stewardship and not the military or any agency because God gave the command to keep, retain, keep charge to the church (Gen 2:15).

In 2005, Environmental Protection Agency laid out a vision for environmental stewardship recognizing it as a means to a more sustainable future [8]. When the environment is kept and made habitable natural resources are conserved, pollution is eradicated and biodiversity is protected.

Environmental stewardship is therefore,

"the responsible, obedient, and faithful living of man according to the instructions of God on the care of the environment, or managing the environment well for the good of all creatures, the happiness of God and the welfare of the environment itself and all the resources therein." [9].

Biblical Principles for Environmental Stewardship

Environmental stewardship is guided by three principles [10]. These principles are the earth keeping principle, the Sabbath principle and the fruitfulness principle.

Earth keeping Principle: this principle is derived from Gen. 2:15 and it states that God commands man to cultivate and keep His creation. The Hebrew word upon which the word keep is based is the word "shamar" which means a loving, caring, sustaining keeping. The Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24 also reveals that God keeps us in all of our vitality, with all our energy and beauty. The Aaronic blessing nurtures all aspect of our life - family, spouse, and children, our neighbors and our friends, with the land and creatures that sustain us, with the air and water, and with our God. Thus, because God keeps us and blesses us as his creation, we must also keep God's creation. And as we keep God creation and the creatures under our care, there will be proper connections of these creatures with members of the same species, and with the many other species with which they interact - the soil, air and water upon which they depend. As God keeps his believing people, so should God's people keep God's creation.

Sabbath Principle: This principle advocates that there should be a time of rest for the people, animals and land. The people were to rest for one day out of seven days; the land was to rest for one year out of seven years (Exodus 23). These year and day of rest is called the Sabbath rest (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). God further promised rain in its season and fruitfulness of the ground if the children of Israel obeyed this law (Leviticus 25 and 26). The Sabbath year is given to protect the land from relentless exploitation, to help the land rejuvenate, to help it get things together again. It is a time of rest and restoration. This principle is not restricted to agriculture alone but it applies to all creation. Man must learn to rest so that he can be renewed again, and be free from sickness. When man refuses to rest, he breaks down and he is forced to rest (Leviticus 26).

Fruitfulness Principle: God has blessed every work of his hand to be fruitful - the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, as well as people. As God provides for the creatures, so should man created to reflect God whose image we bear provide for the creatures. As man enjoys the creation, man must not destroy its fruitfulness. Man must save the species whose interactions with each other, and with land and water, form the fabric of the biosphere just like Noah did. The

words of Prophet Ezekiel 34:18 must be clear in our heart. It states “Is it not enough for you to feed on the green pastures? Must you also trample them with your feet?” “Is it not enough for you to drink the pure water? Must you also muddy it with your feet?”

The church’s Curriculum

The church is the voluntary coming together of believers, those who have confessed the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and savior and are following him daily. As believers meet, they worship, proclaim God’s word, educate, minister and fellowship. These activities are referred to by Powers [11] as the functions or tasks of the church and they are necessary so that the church can fulfil its purpose and claim its identity as the people of God, the new humanity, and the body of Christ. Albeit, these tasks can only be achieved through an effective implementation of the curriculum for the church. The curriculum refers to all activities members of the church are made to go through under the guidance of the church for transformation or change to take place in the life of the church members. In other words, everything that is done in the church constitutes the church’s curriculum (praying, singing, clapping, dancing, etc.). The church also has curriculum materials used for the purpose of educating members of the church. In the Baptist denomination, the curriculum materials include the Sunday school (children and adult), worship (children), discipleship (children and adult), women missionary (Sunbeam, Girls’ Auxiliary, Lydia), men missionary union (Royal Ambassador), youth fellowship, and Baptist student fellowship curriculum.

The various curriculum materials of the church have emphasized the issue of stewardship. Churches also observe stewardship week with emphasis on money and giving. However, the issue of environmental stewardship has not been given prominence. It is high time that churches gave attention to stewardship of the environment and also teach members how to be good stewards of the environment that God has given to them.

Environmental Stewardship and Church curriculum

The church has an important task to teach members. One of the things among many that the church need to teach members is how to keep the environment God gave them. According to Oladeji [12], the environment is part of God’s creation whose stewardship has been neglected but which is an important dynamic of the assignment of the church to fulfilling the mission of God on earth. It becomes important therefore, for members to know how to keep the environment God gave as good stewards of God’s resources. The church in developing and implementing her various curriculums can help members to be good stewards of the environment in the following ways.

Children and Teenagers Curriculum

This curriculum takes care of the teaching ministry to children between the ages 0-19 years. The curriculum that can be used to address environmental stewardship in the Nigerian Baptist Convention are the children Sunday school, discipleship lifestyle for children, Girls’ Auxiliary, and Royal Ambassadors curriculum. Children in this age bracket are strong and active. They are interested in several activities and are seeking answers to reasons behind several happenings. It is also interesting to know that some of these children and teenagers do not know where and how the food they eat come from. This therefore, provides an opportunity to teach these children environmental stewardship both in theory and in practice.

Teaching Children/Teenagers Stewardship of the Environment

Children love God and they can serve God. Children know that God created the world and everything in it and they would love to keep the world God created clean and beautiful. It is therefore important that children are taught how to keep the environment clean in order to be good stewards of the environment that God has given them.

Teaching children about stewardship means helping children understand ways the church fulfills the understanding that God has given to all humankind a position of dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:25). It also means helping children understand that being given this position of caretaker (dominion) over God's gift of the earth requires us to be stewards of God's creation.

What should children/Teenagers be taught?

Children and Teenagers have the need to be taught about stewardship because stewardship helps to build self esteem, brings joy and contentment, connects more deeply with God, and also because children have the the ability and natural longing to to give [13]. Erschen [14] further stated six basic concepts that children need to know about stewardship. Theses basic concepts are that children must:

- Know that everything they have is a gift from God.
- Be grateful for the gifts we receive.
- Know that they have a responsibility to share our gifts.
- Ask God for guidance in using our gifts.
- Turn away from materialism.
- Know that joy is found in good stewardship.

Specifically, children/teenagers need to be taught about environmental stewardship in the following ways:

1. That the environment is a gift from God and God gave the environment for our benefit. God also expects us (children inclusive) to care/ nurture, protect, conserve and preserve the environment (Genesis 1:28). And that we (children/teenagers inclusive) will give account and be rewarded for how we used the environment that God gave.
2. How to use the things God provided for them like food, water, television, pocket money, light, sun etc. it is not enough that they have these things but they should know how to use them [15].
3. How to reduce, reuse and recycle waste from young age so that it is part of them and they can use the knowledge as they grow.
4. How to plant items like flowers, corn, yam, vegetables etc. so that they can appreciate the process of growth for these items. Some children were asked years back how the yam they eat come about, the response was that yam were plucked. Taking children/teenagers through this planting experience will remove such embarrassing response from children.
5. Learn about other creatures (goats, dogs, ants, chickens, etc.) and how to show empathy to these creatures and not treat them anyhow.
6. The benefit of a clean and healthy environment
7. Learn proper behavior towards the environment. Behaviors such as proper sanitation and use of sanitation facilities, proper disposal of waste, use of natural resources like water, and how to avoid pollution.
8. Allow children/teenagers to participate in taking care of the environment. This could be by taking part in planting trees, creating a garden, or picking up garbage. This is the beginning of the stewardship mindset.
9. Adults should demonstrate own enjoyment of nature before children/teenagers. Pointing out trees that adults think are beautiful or encouraging kids to smell flowers that are adult figure favorites will show children that they also love and respect the natural world.
10. Read and reflect on stewardship Gospel stories, such as the Good Samaritan, the Faithful Servants, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Beatitudes [16].
11. Encourage children to write thank-you notes. Such notes can be written to Pastors, Sunday school teachers, family, and friends [17].

How can children/Teenagers be taught

Children can be taught in several ways. Since children will imitate adult figures around them, it becomes important for the adult figures to live by being good example of good stewards of the environment. Children will also learn through their five senses. Thus, children should be allowed to see, touch, taste where necessary, feel, and smell the nature and do the nature. Teaching about the nature should not be abstract but engaging for the children. It will not just make them learn but what they learn will be more permanent. According to Bryant and Hungerford cited by Damerell [18] Children are a frequent target audience as attitudes towards the environment start developing at an early age and once formed do not change easily. Children can also be taken out for nature walk, go to botanical gardens, farm settlements etc. These allow them to see with their eyes and appreciate nature and other creatures in nature.

Adult Curriculum

Adult curriculum in the church are those of the Lydia Auxiliary, Women Missionary Union and Men Missionary Union. Adults in the church are significant individuals whose actions and inactions are being watched and copied by the children and teenagers. Thus, adults need to be taught to be good examples of caring for the environment. Specifically, adult's curriculum should teach members:

1. To use natural resources with thankfulness and not abuse or waste it because natural resources belong to God, we are only care takers (Gen.2:15).
2. To value creation and creatures for what they are and not what they can benefit from them.
3. To be part of environmental initiatives like tree planting, environmental sanitation, conservation of water and energy, etc.
4. To know that they are responsible for keeping and preserving the environment where they live or find themselves. This will not only make them good stewards of the environment God have graciously given to them but they will also live a healthy life.

Gnanakan [19] and Oslon [20] further suggested the following to be included in the activities of the local church in relation to reviving and awakening the church into environmental stewardship:

- Establish a creation care council that meets regularly to plan and ensure that the church gets involved in environmental stewardship.
- Conduct Bible studies on environmental stewardship regularly.
- Focus on environmental stewardship in worship through sermons, hymns, etc
- Explore the possibilities of establishing recycling projects.
- Investigate energy conservation options that are available.
- Embark on cleaning of the environment on schedule.

- Embark on greening the environment by planting trees and flowers.

CONCLUSION

God created a beautiful world. However, some activities of man have destroyed and are destroying the beautiful world that God created. The church has been given the command to be the light of the world. This means the church has the responsibility to educate members of the church and show non-members of the church how to care for the beautiful world that God created. The church curriculum has been identified in this paper as a good medium in educating members of the church about environmental stewardship who will in turn go into the world to show by examples how to take care of the beautiful world God created. The curriculum for children/teenagers should teach how to use the things God provided for them like food, water, television, pocket money, light, sun etc., how to reduce, reuse and recycle waste from young age so that it is part of them and they can use the knowledge as they grow, how to plant items like flowers, corn, yam, vegetables etc. so that they can appreciate the process of growth for these items, learn about other creatures (goats, dogs, ants, chickens, etc.) and how to show empathy to these creatures and not treat them anyhow. The adult curriculum should teach and emphasise the use natural resources with thankfulness and not abuse or waste it because natural resources belong to God, we are only care takers (Gen.2:15), value creation and creatures for what they are and not what they can benefit from them alone, being part of environmental initiatives like tree planting, environmental sanitation, conservation of water and energy

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