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Christian climate care: Slow change, modesty and eco-theo-citizenship

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This qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews and documentary analysis conducted between 2014 and 2016 to investigate the nature of pro-environmental behaviour of members within the Eco-Congregation Scotland network. We argue for an integrative analytical frame, that we call “eco-theo-citizenship,” which synthesises strengths of values-, practice- and citizenship-based approaches to the study of pro-environmental behaviour within the specific context of religious environmental groups. This study finds the Eco-Congregation groups studied are not primarily issue driven, and instead have an emphasis on “community-building” activities and a concept of environmental citizenship which spans multiple political scales from local to international. Primary values emphasised included “environmental justice” and “stewardship.” Analysis of the data indicated that groups in this network are distinctive in two particular ways: (1) group focus on mobilising values and environmental concern towards “community building” can produce what looks like a more conservative approach to climate change mobilisation, preserving and working slowly within institutional structures, with a primary focus not on climate change mitigation per se but on the consolidation and development of the community and broader network; and (2) these groups can often under-report their accomplishments and the footprint of their work on the basis of a common religious conviction which we have termed a “culture of modesty.”

KEYWORDS

behaviour change, Christianity, citizenship, climate change mitigation, environmental values, practices, religion

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a widely held perception that religious – and especially Christian – beliefs and pro-environmental behaviours are inversely correlated (Leopold, 1949; Taylor, 2010; White, 1967). There are good reasons to challenge this assumption. The World Council of Churches, a major international federation of Christian churches, has long pressed for action on climate change, beginning at one of the first international scientific meetings on climate change in Bonn, Germany, in 1974 and continuing to lobby the UN even before the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992. More recently, in the first Papal Encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis admitted that “mistaken

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understanding” of Christian principles had led Christians “to justify mistreating nature” and “to exercise tyranny over creation” (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 147). As well as these high-level engagements with climate change, there is also evidence of growing activity among many religious persons, including Christians, “from below” (Kearns, 2011; Wilkinson, 2012). This includes lobbying of political representatives, church-led campaigns for divestment from fossil fuel companies, sponsorship of climate and environmental education, community investment in energy conservation and renewable power, and promotion of life-style changes and climate-friendly rituals such as “climate fasts” and pilgrimage.

In this study we explore the relationship between pro-environmental work and Christian identity. Research into religion and environmental behaviour has tended to focus on national-level social attitudes surveys where religious identity is measured as a matter of personal affiliation (Hagevi, 2014; Village, 2015). There is reason to be uneasy about reducing environmentalism to individual action and the related assumption of a linear relationship between values and behaviour (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; Shove, 2010). We argue for a more integrative frame, that we call eco-theo-citizenship, which represents an ongoing process of community formation and consolidation. As part of ongoing community development, religious groups may contract or grow, intensify their focus on a single issue, or broaden their remit. Through this process, small changes to the environmental life of and community-building activities within a group may grow towards a firmer expression of values, which in turn reinforce the practices undertaken as part of broader membership and matriculation processes. These are also made sense of through expressions of citizenship, joining parochial concerns to a wider sense of community and tending to the needs of both local and distant others.

This paper draws on data gathered as part of a large three-year study of environmentally literate, socially engaged Christians who were members of a religious environmental organisation, Eco-Congregation Scotland (ECS). ECS comprises a network of more than 400 churches, including Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, Unitarian, Quaker and Roman Catholic communities. The network is particularly strong in the major Scottish urban centres of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, but also includes many rural congregations. In this paper, we argue that the iterative process of the ECS programme is just as – if not more – important than the programme's environmental goals and outcomes. This builds on Hitchings et al.'s (2015) definition of the “action–value relationship” as a process through which individuals change towards more sustainable behaviours without necessarily invoking environmental sustainability; in this article we extend this to encompass processes of eco-theo-socialisation at the communal (or congregational) – rather than individual – level. We argue that while ECS groups may become eco-active in several different ways, values, practices and citizenship are articulated in a mutually reinforcing spiral. ECS groups work across scales, from local activism to national-level action, and towards forms of environmental care that invoke long-term temporalities. Their climate care also emphasises community building – working slowly within institutional structures – rather than focusing on climate change mitigation per se. We suggest that there are both challenges and strengths to this kind of community (rather than issue) focused environmental action. Furthermore, we highlight some concrete ways that policy-makers might engage more effectively with religious groups, particularly in light of three key features exhibited by ECS: their focus on process; their slow pace of work; and a shared religious conviction, which we have termed a culture of modesty.

2 | ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGE AND RELIGION

Understanding of pro-environmental behaviour change has advanced considerably over the last 20 years. It is possible to identify three broad approaches stretching across environmental policy, social and environmental psychology, sociology and geography. These are approaches based on values, practices and citizenship. We begin this section by reviewing current understanding of these dynamics. We then turn to studies that deal with explicitly religious approaches to environmental change, before outlining the areas upon which we build in this paper.

2.1 | Pro-environmental behaviour change: Values, practices, and citizenship

Two of the most influential values-based models have been the theory of planned behaviour and the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The central premise of these models is that behavioural choices are rooted in mental processes, such that behaviours follow individual values. Accordingly, interventions can be tailored to change the values and mental make-up of individuals or groups, whose behaviour will in turn adapt to their new values (see Jackson, 2005, for a review). This linear process underpins the now widely discredited information deficit model, in which the provision of clear information based on sound scientific and technical knowledge was seen as a logical route to changing behaviour (Burgess et al., 2003). One of the well known shortcomings of such rationalist approaches is the

value–action gap. Empirically, numerous studies have shown that values do not translate in any straightforward way into behaviour (Blake, 1999; Flynn et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2009). Despite this, values-based approaches remain popular. For example, in the UK, the *Common Cause* initiative runs programmes and workshops designed to generate “compassionate values” in decision-makers, based on the acknowledgement that intrinsic values are more important than extrinsic values in a sustainable worldview (Crompton, 2010). Recently, interest has emerged in what Hitchings et al. (2015, p. 1) call the “action–value opportunity.” This is a situation in which individuals carry out environmentally sustainable behaviours without making direct connection to environmental values. Since the relation between value and action is not one-way, Hitchings et al. suggest that these “inadvertent environmentalists” offer potential to develop cultural change out of everyday activity. One reason for the continued popularity of such values-based approaches is that they prioritise a deep personal shift towards sustainability, rather than measuring success in quantitative terms. However, to greater or lesser extents, values-based approaches remain individualistic. Critical social scientists argue that such individualist approaches are rooted in the very systems of neoliberal individualism that perpetuate environmental crisis. Interest has therefore turned from personal values to social practices.

Practice-based frameworks focus on how environmental behaviour is embedded in existing patterns of everyday life, from worldviews and cultural norms on one hand, to material arrangements and infrastructure on the other. In this literature, focus shifts from individual values and motivations to active doing: from the individual who heats their home to the practice of heating homes (Shove, 2010). Practices “carry” their subjects and subjects “carry” their practices (Reckwitz, 2002). Social practice theory aims to understand how practices are organised across time and space, and how any given practice becomes normalised. Competing approaches to defining “practice” diverge according to the relative weight attached to meaning (symbols, images, reflexive interpretation, rules and norms), actions (skills, behaviours, competencies, habits) and materials (clothes, buildings, transport infrastructures and so on) (Shove & Walker, 2007). Of particular note are studies that have shown how material objects, from smart meters to bins, can have considerable agency in everyday practices (Hobson, 2006). For example, Shove et al. (2014) demonstrated how building infrastructure interacts with bodily sensation in the production of 18–21°C as a standardised indoor temperature. Attention to the material fabric around which social practices occur is therefore important for practice-based approaches. Broadly, change initiatives involve processes of “environmental socialisation” (Hargreaves, 2011). This means consciousness raising to bring unexamined practices into focus, considering barriers to new practices, and attempting collectively to overcome these barriers. In an empirical study of one work-based, structured behaviour change programme, Hargreaves (2011, p. 15) found that positive environmental outcomes were not preceded by value or attitude change, but through a subtle change in the “rules of the game,” the “way practices were approached, understood and experienced by practitioners.” Such behaviour change initiatives are hard-won, requiring investment of many different resources.

The third way of conceptualising behaviour change situates environmental activities in a broader understanding of citizenship. Environmental citizenship has been taken up by liberal state theorists, who argue for integrating a range of environmental duties, rights and responsibilities into existing ideals of the common good (Barry, 2005), including most commonly through sustainable consumption (Dobson, 2004). From a “green governmentality” perspective, critical social scientists pose different questions, concerning how certain subjectivities get produced and the relation of subjects to modes of governance, or the “conduct of conduct” (Rutherford, 2007). One of the strengths of a governmentality approach is to show the shifting relationship between state or organisational plans, rationales and techniques, and the way these play out in practice. In most green governmentality research, mainstream environmentalism is critiqued as aligning too easily with an economic *status quo*. Actions such as fuel switching, energy efficiency, or Fairtrade procurement do not alter wider socio-technical systems, but produce quiescent citizens persuaded that “doing their bit” is sufficient.

2.2 | Religion and environmental change

A series of studies have aimed to identify the relationship between concern about climate change and religious affiliation or belief. Until recently, heavy emphasis was placed on samples from the USA (Koehrsen, 2017), although this is changing, with a growing number of studies of countries in the British Isles (Clements, 2012; DeLashmutt, 2011; Fahey et al., 2006; Marangudakis & Hayes, 2001) and cross-national studies that include the UK (Hagevi, 2014; Hayes & Marangudakis, 2000; Nicinska, 2013). Yet, as many multivariate studies which include religion alongside other factors in assessing environmental attitudes observe, religious affiliation does not necessarily have a strong correlation to environmental attitudes or behaviours (Djupe & Hunt, 2009; Hope & Jones, 2014; Village, 2015). The Pew Research Centre notes that, at least in the USA, “political party identification and race/ethnicity are much better predictors of environmental attitudes than are religious identity or observance” (Pew Research Center, 2015). Similarly, Li et al. (2016) suggest that religious persons may

experience cross-pressuring effects, whereby political and religious affiliations are in conflict around an issue like climate change. Furthermore, illustrating the value–action gap we noted above, there are good reasons to doubt whether concern can be reliably correlated with behaviour, and whether reported behaviour relates in a statistically significant way to actual behaviour. As one recent meta-study survey of pro-environmental behaviour studies puts it, “the overlap between intentions and actual action is about 20%” (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014, p. 151). This is borne out in research conducted by Schultz et al. (2000), which finds that “biblical literalism” was strongly correlated with environmental concern, but had no correlation with self-reported pro-environmental behaviour. Overall, it seems wise to question whether religious affiliation or belief are strong predictors of environmental behaviours.

While they reveal broad patterns, values-based surveys by their nature focus on aggregate calculations of individual preferences. Another body of work, by contrast, seeks to understand religious discourse as expressed through particular social networks. Wardekker et al. (2009; see also Danielsen, 2013) surveyed internet and media sources, and identified three basic narratives in US religious public debate on climate change: (1) conservational stewardship (caring for creation as God made it); (2) developmental stewardship (following the progress imperative, the duty to turn wilderness into productive garden); and (3) developmental preservation (achieving a balance of conserving and developing nature). The authors conclude that these discourses are not reducible to any particular worldview and that “there is no simple relation between denominations and the discourses” (p. 515). In contrast, the three types use “strikingly similar concepts and images” such as “God as owner of the world” and “mankind [*sic*] as stewards” (p. 518). Particularly germane to our analysis, Wardekker et al. (2009, p. 518) conclude that three specific ethical themes lie at the forefront of debate: “the effects on nature, the implications for future generations ... and the implications for the poor,” with this third concern for contemporary poverty, both global and local, being the most prominent.

A second form of non-individualist research analyses climate-change-focused third-sector groups which are explicitly religious. Given the number and range of these groups, there has been surprisingly little research devoted to them. An early study drew attention to the underlying spiritual aspects of apparently secular environmental groups in the USA (Taylor, 1991). More recently, Smith and Pulver's (2009) qualitative study of religious-environmental organisations (REMOs) in the USA noted a split between groups with ethics-based and those with issue-based approaches to climate change, concluding that “engagement in ethics-based work” was “integral in bringing about lasting environmental change” (p. 155). Furthermore, the authors found that many of these groups see a focus on community building to be an important component of an ethics-based approach (Smith & Pulver, 2009). Through a social network analysis, Ellingson et al. (2012) ascertained that REMOs were more likely to collaborate and build alliances with other groups that shared their religious affiliation or theological frame. These researchers also concluded that “REMOs’ religious culture shapes the structure of the movement field, which in turn may limit the scope and efficacy of religious environmentalism” (Ellingson et al., 2012, p. 269).

One important implication of this body of work is that (as we have observed above) practices may configure religious subjects in specific ways, which in turn has an influence on environmental behaviour in these religious contexts. Scholars such as Brand (2007, p. 627) see the green neoliberal subject of governmentality as distinctly post-religious, with subjectivity serving as “a product of everyday experience once determined by religion, tradition, class and kinship and now, under postmodern individualisation, more inclined to be a personal project or the ‘construction of one's self.’” Yet, as we observe below, contemporary religious subjects who participate in groups such as Eco-Congregation Scotland challenge this reading by their participation in activities which are funded and monitored by national governments and part of a wider faith-based movement. We want to emphasise a post-secular approach which can more readily account for the entangled and complex relationship between contemporary neoliberal citizenship and religious identity (Cloke & Beaumont, 2012; Habermas, 2008).

Finally, Christian eco-theology seeks to generate increased concern for climate change on an explicitly theological basis. Eco-theology does not follow a social scientific methodology, but it nonetheless deploys analysis of empirical sources (particularly sacred texts and religious rituals). One aim, as Veldman et al. (2013, p. 5) put it, is to explore the place of climate and environment in “believer's worldviews or cosmologies.” Recent literature surveys such as Taylor et al. (2016a, 2016b) indicate the breadth of eco-theology and the attempt to “green religion,” with around 12 sustained treatments of climate change specifically (Gerten & Bergmann, 2013; McFague, 2008; Northcott, 2013; Northcott & Scott, 2014; Primavesi, 2013; Rasmussen, 2013; Schaefer, 2011). Seen in this way, the goals of many eco-theologians are resonant with pro-environmental behaviour change models, particularly in mobilising the assumption that behaviour is reasoned and flows from processes of value-oriented decision-making. One consistent theme across all this scholarship is the recommendation to re-narrate the human–divine relationship in light of planetary history, and in particular climatic change. Global justice is another common theme in eco-theology, framing climate change as a matter of compassion towards humans and other

creatures who have or will experience disproportionate negative impacts (McFague, 2008; Northcott, 2013). These arguments are similar to those put forward by environmental ethicists and philosophers (Gardiner, 2011; Shue, 2014) but depart from the tendency in these literatures to draw on the liberal political tradition as a framework, preferring a range of ancient and more explicitly religious conceptions, such as descriptions of justice as compassion and neighbour love. Many of these accounts can be seen as participating in the new movement towards the environmental humanities, a broad move to re-situate environmental challenges in cultures and context-specific lifeworlds rather than in global environmental policy and science (Bergthaller et al., 2014).

2.3 | Summary

Research into religious action on climate change has struggled to embrace a broad methodology, tending to resort either to a focus on statements of belief expressed in print by official representatives or distilled through quantitative surveys. On the other hand, research into the mechanics of environmental behaviour change through values, practice and citizenship-based approaches has tended to neglect religious groups altogether. There is therefore a gap in understanding the dynamics of pro-environmental behaviour within explicitly religious groups. In order to address this gap in knowledge, we employ a hybrid conceptual framework drawn from the literature outlined above.

First, in seeking to avoid the narrow exclusivity of individualistic consumer- or elite/leader-oriented studies, we provide a more integrative frame: eco-theo-citizenship. We build on the literature outlined above to emphasise the way theological concepts are mobilised to sustain pro-environmental behaviour change from the bottom up, rather than providing a more ephemeral umbrella for religious commentary in general. Second, rather than seeing actions as flowing in a linear way from values, we are interested in their mutual growth and reinforcement. Building on the insights of practice theory, we emphasise that the action–value relationship goes beyond individuals to encompass processes of eco-theo-socialisation at the communal (or “congregational”) level. Key questions are: What actions, values and processes nurture and sustain environmentalism at the congregational level? How is eco-theo-citizenship expressed? Third, building on the awareness that “baseline” environmental actions, such as recycling or energy efficiency, are necessary but insufficient to achieve meaningful environmental transition, we are interested in how congregations’ eco-theo-citizenship might traverse scales beyond the congregation to local, national and global communities. We seek to ascertain the extent to which eco-theo-citizenship moves beyond dominant neoliberal and secular approaches to environmentalism, to understand the distinctive qualities of religious environmental activism amid their broader networks.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This article draws on an in-depth qualitative case study (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 1994), which was part of a wider study on Christian environmentalism. Our specific case is the religious environmental movement ECS, the largest environmental third-sector group in Scotland. ECS is similar in many ways to Eco-Church (A’Rocha) and Green Christian, based in England and Wales. Like these, ECS is not necessarily a formal social movement; rather, it is an ecumenical (Christian but non-denominational) open-membership organisation composed of local churches across Scotland. Our rationale for this case selection is three-fold. First, ECS provides a focus concentrated enough to allow in-depth analysis of a religious movement involved in environmental activities. Second, ECS is diverse and wide ranging, including a range of denominations spread across both demographic and geographic boundaries. Finally, as noted above, the ECS case allows us to move beyond the US focus of many published studies in this area.

3.1 | About our research subject: Eco-Congregation Scotland

Eco-Congregation Scotland was founded in 1999 by Kippen Environment Centre (now Forth Environment Link), a local charity devoted to environmental education in central Scotland. A government grant from the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme kick-started the project, with further funding from the Scottish Government providing salaries for full-time staff. In 2011, the United Reformed Church contributed additional funding which subsidised the position of a full-time environmental chaplain for a five-year term, bringing the total staff to five. The programme has expanded rapidly since its official launch in 2001, growing from 89 congregations in 2005, to 269 by 2011 and 344 in mid-2016 (approximately 9% of all churches in Scotland).

From 2010 to 2018, the programme has been structured as follows. Congregations are invited to begin by registering their interest by completing a basic, one-sided form. Eco-Congregations then undertake a range of open-ended actions under three headings: (1) spiritual living (making explicit links between faith and environmental concerns); (2) practical living (practical activities associated with the life of the congregation and the church grounds); (3) global living (having a positive impact on the wider community). The next stage involves the submission of an award application, describing actions taken and detailing the church's carbon footprint. If the application is deemed successful after a visit from two third-party volunteer assessors, an award is made. These stages can be repeated a number of times, such that an Eco-Congregation has two or three awards. Registered Eco-Congregations are encouraged to join a local ECS regional network, which functions as a horizontal support and mentoring mechanism across churches. As of March 2017, there are currently 21 regional networks across Scotland. This process of taking registrations and using a tiered award or recognition scheme is common to many voluntary organisations, and the use of a curricular approach to group intake and development is a feature of environmental education more broadly. A number of groups take a similar approach, including Earth Ministry (<https://www.earthministry.org>), Eco-Church (<http://arocha.org.uk>), and Green Faith (<https://www.greenfaith.org>). Transition Town communities (<https://transitionnetwork.org/>) go through a similar process by which they are marked first as “interested,” become “active” and then gain “official” status.

3.2 | Sampling

We conducted research into 44 of the (at the time of our initial sampling in 2014) 344 Eco-Congregations (13%). We used geographic information system (GIS) to undertake purposive sampling which was representative of the geographic and socio-economic make-up of Eco-Congregations. This employed a range of publicly available government datasets, including the Index of Multiple Deprivation, the 6-Fold Urban Rural scale, Regional Authorities, and religious denomination. As Eco-Congregations are unevenly distributed across these demographics (as is the case for other environmental groups) our goal was not to cover each demographic unit on a nationally representative basis, but to track with the distribution of ECS. We sampled at least 10% of ECS representation across deprivation, urban/rural, and denomination (Tables 1–3; Figure 1).

Geographic information system was not used for data analysis purposes. Rather, it was to ensure that our sample was representative of ECS as a movement. As Tables 1–3 indicate, the distribution of ECS groups across most social indicators could be quite small, usually fewer than 10, except for a primary category. As a result, we kept our analysis at a

TABLE 1 Sample by denomination

Denomination	
Church of Scotland	33
Scottish Episcopal	5
United Reformed Church	2
Ecumenical	1
Independent	1
Methodist	1
Roman Catholic	1

TABLE 2 Sample by area

Urban/rural	
Large urban areas	23
Other urban areas	7
Accessible small towns	3
Remote small towns	2
Accessible rural areas	6
Remote rural areas	3

TABLE 3 Sample by deprivation

Deprivation ranking quintile	
Q1 (most deprived)	1
Q2	3
Q3	13
Q4	11
Q5 (least deprived)	16

generalised level. Our team explored the possibility of more granular analysis, for example parsing out features of congregations according to deprivation level or an urban/rural split, but we were not able to identify any conclusive distinctions.

3.3 | Qualitative approaches employed

We employed a qualitative methodology focused on semi-structured interviews, supported by participant observation and documentary analysis (Ayoub et al., 2014). This broadly followed a grounded theory approach; that is, applying minimal prescription and an open-ended form of inquiry (Charmaz, 2013). Across the 44 sites, the research team conducted 56 interviews with a total of 66 individuals. Interviews were conducted with “insider” individuals with a high level of commitment to pro-environmental action within their congregation, usually the named contact responsible for a particular Eco-Congregation. We chose to treat ECS like a form of social movement (Della Porta, 2014), so our aim was to focus on the key agents fostering change across a representative sample of Eco-Congregations in order to identify recurring patterns and themes, not to focus on the micro-dynamics of particular Eco-Congregations. The research team also conducted participant observation at church services, Eco-Congregation regional and annual meetings and assessment visits. This involved observing interactions, listening to presentations and conducting a range of ad hoc conversations in order to put interviewee testimony in more context. Even though this is a relatively large network, it is a close-knit community. Keeping this in mind, we have omitted specific details about speakers to preserve their anonymity. Finally, with the permission of ECS we conducted documentary analysis on an anonymised sample of 90 of 133 ECS award application documents.

4 | CONSTITUTING ECO-THEO-CITIZENSHIP

In this section we explore how eco-theo-citizenship emerges. We emphasise mutually reinforcing elements of practical action and changing culture, whereby environmental care becomes expressed as part of a congregation's notion of good Christian citizenship. The section addresses in turn the narration of environmental practices (eco) by our respondents, the uniquely theological values bound up with the ECS process (theo) and the pathways through which congregations may become eco-active civic actors and so reconstitute their sense of community (citizenship).

4.1 | “Eco”: Mapping environmental practices

To ascertain the range of actions being undertaken across the sites, we analysed the award applications of 67% of Eco-Congregations (Table 4). The replacement of aging building fabric such as boilers, installing insulation, waste reduction and recycling programmes were mentioned in the majority of award applications. Potentially controversial activities, such as direct political action (examples included participating in climate marches, demonstrations and campaigns), show up far less often in the application documents, but were mentioned in interviews. Several of the longest-running Eco-Congregations that we studied had developed a culture where, as practice theorists describe them, “baseline” activities had become entrenched, and the congregation was now focusing on further, more ambitious building refurbishment, working in the wider local community, mentoring other ECS groups within the local region, or becoming involved in more direct political activities, such as lobbying for fossil fuel divestment

Actions were usually accompanied by awareness raising and culture change activities, from environmentally themed sermons, to newsletters, to signs and informal discussions. All Eco-Congregations had to some extent incorporated environmental themes into their worship. This varied in depth, from a one-off sermon about food and climate change during

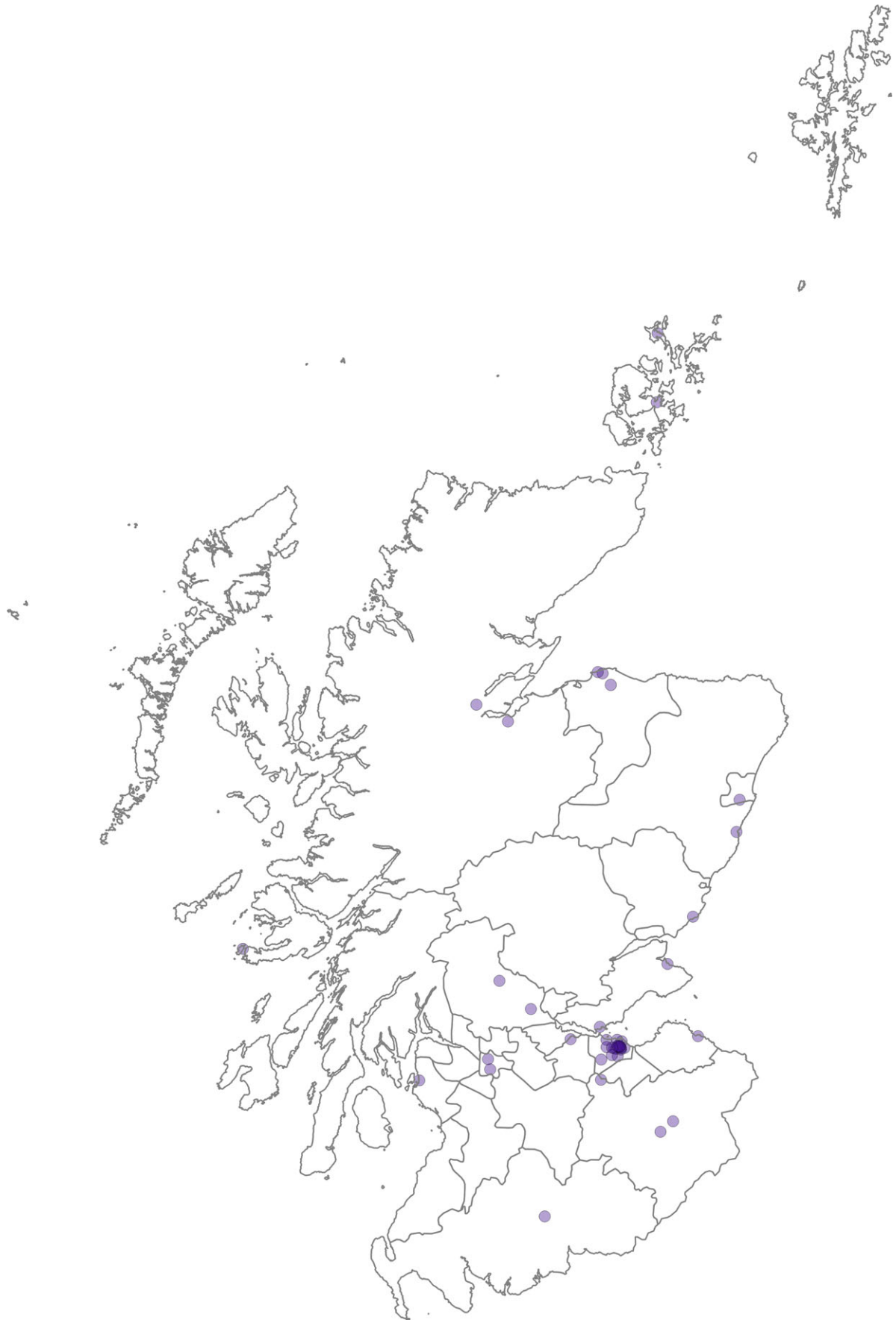


FIGURE 1 Map of study sites.

TABLE 4 Proportion of Eco-Congregations reporting specific actions undertaken

Action	%
Energy efficiency	79
Waste management or recycling	78
Links made with development NGO (e.g., Christian Aid)	69
Gardening project	42
Sought external funding for energy efficiency/renewable energy (e.g., Climate Challenge Fund)	33
Direct political lobbying (mailing, contacted MSP/MP etc.)	30
Activity focus on animals or wilderness	29
Practical action for neighbour care (free meals, outreach, etc.)	28
Links made with secular environmental NGOs (e.g., Friends of the Earth)	26
Food production, growing, or ethical sourcing	8
Solar or wind energy project	6

Harvest, to a 10-week series of sermons on Genesis and creation care. In our interviews, we heard a range of views: some Eco-Congregation members felt well supported by their church leader, while others felt their community could be doing more to support environmental issues, with a small contingent indicating that they were working against some level of internal opposition or indifference. In underlining our integrative framing in this paper, it is important to note that interviewees did not necessarily draw clear separations between the spiritual and practical dimensions of Eco-Congregations. One minister who helped to lead the eco-congregation effort at their church illustrates this:

I did a service on ‘For The Love Of,’ which was great and well received, so we try and do that. We also pray for environmental issues as well. Then, there's practical things, so we've got a bird feeder and we've got renewable energy in the manse. (Interview 35)

This interviewee continued to list further practical actions. This pattern of rapidly oscillating between spiritual and practical action was repeated across several interviews, demonstrating how closely related these forms of activity are. Indeed, it indicates that practical actions themselves can be a catalyst for wider values changing (Hitchings et al., 2015).

4.2 | “Theo”: Mapping eco-theological values

The Eco-Congregation process is explicitly designed to build upon this link between practical activities and spiritual growth. In our interviews, the two most frequently articulated values were global environmental justice and care for creation. As one interviewee indicated, “People are aware of inequality; [we] need to fix our world and part of fixing is the fixing of creation” (Interview 43). As Chaplin (2016) suggests, justice has, since the 1970s, often provided the initial gateway towards pristinating environmental issues as a valid concern for Christian communities (Northcott, 2013). Another respondent, who served as leader of a busy Eco-Congregation, as well as being an active participant in local green party politics and a nearby transition group, noted the promise of justice as a possible galvanising factor:

Ecology is a social justice issue. I don't think – not quite yet at least – people have, in church, just really caught onto that. I think once they have, that'll be quite a big deal. (Interview 34)

Across our interviews and review of application materials, multiple respondents indicated a connection to their involvement in fair trade, connections with Christian Aid (which launched a major international climate justice campaign in 2014), and reception of the encyclical published by Pope Francis (2015). As we have already suggested above, the tendency to mobilise around justice issues reflects a tendency by these groups to find motivation in ethical concern over specific causes or issues (Smith & Pulver, 2009). As we note below, justice can also provide the basis for a mode of eco-theo-citizenship that creates a relationship between local participation in environmental care and community building with participation in wider social movements. As Jenkins (2013) argues, integrating notions of justice can also help to mitigate what can often be an overly abstract discourse surrounding climate change ethics, providing the context for a “prophetic pragmatism.”

TABLE 5 Number of times values expressed across all interviews

Values expressed in interview	Frequency
Global/social justice	19
Stewardship and creation care	17
Community outreach	13
Intergenerational concern	12
Love for nature	7

The second most frequently articulated value was stewardship and creation care. A range of similar studies have found stewardship to be a prevalent value within REMOs (Wardekker et al., 2009), which, like justice, is not exclusive to Christian activist identity but can also be found in other religious discourses (Chaplin, 2016; Danielsen, 2013; Hope & Jones, 2014). We found that stewardship was a metaphor for human responsibility and was closely related to the theological particularities of Christian identity. As Eco-Congregation members remarked:

As part of our faith journey, if we look at what the bible says about creation, good stewardship of resources [is key]. It is incumbent on us to put that into practice, and particularly when we are faced with elements of climate change and destruction of the planet. (Interview 38)

For me the theology is simply, ‘God made the world; it is His world’ and we have a responsibility to be good stewards, including of the stuff that comes out of the earth. (Interview 37)

Within stewardship and creation care there was also an evident attention to parsimony and thrift. Six interviewees mentioned thrift directly through statements such as “I hate waste; I can’t tolerate waste: we are a very wasteful nation” (Interview 56), and the need to be “careful and thrifty and not do anything to excess” (Interview 35).

Other values occurred less frequently (Table 5). One key point to note here is that these themes are significantly less nuanced than the top-down US Christian discourses identified by Wardekker et al. (2009). In their study of statements by denominational leaders, Wardekker et al. identified three specific subsets of “stewardship”: conserving the “garden of God” as it was created; turning the wilderness into a garden as it should become; and developmental combining of progress and preservation. By contrast, our study found that Eco-Congregations articulated a straightforward discourse of stewardship as “caring for creation.” We were unable to identify any clear sub-themes. This suggests that the complex narratives expressed in “opinion documents, press releases, formal resolutions, informative materials ... speeches, blogs, and online newspaper articles” (Wardekker et al., 2009, p. 514) are not those used by Christian environmentalists in an everyday context. It is also important to note that, unlike Kearns (1996) who bifurcates stewardship and justice into separate categories, alongside a third category of “creation spirituality,” we did not find that respondents fell neatly into support for stewardship *or* justice. The values were not mutually exclusive, and often invoked by the same persons with limited precision or elaboration.

4.3 | “Citizenship”: Mapping community growth

There is no single mechanism by which congregations become eco-active. Instead, there are at least three possible pathways which we observed at work in the groups we studied. First, through the energy and leadership of a committed individual; second, through a group of individuals who gather together to establish a team; and third, by a top-down approach, in which eco-activity is integrated into existing church management processes. Whatever route a congregation takes, their activity is part of a process of changing culture through altering citizenship norms. A range of studies that have focused on elite actors (Danielsen, 2013) and management processes (DeLashmutt, 2011; Li et al., 2016) have tended to test for the efficacy of top-down work within grassroots communities. In our view, testing for such correlations obscures a more complicated dynamic. At the congregational level, we found that the structure and process of Eco-Congregations was understood to help facilitate a longer-term (and as we will note below, slow) cultural shift. Energy and resources are invested in practical actions, alongside the communication of environmental messages through church services and publications. However, as one minister reported:

You probably wouldn’t be surprised to hear there are quite a lot of people around here; it’s not that they hate the Earth, I mean, you know, they’re not deliberately destroying it, but ... (Interview 29)

Another respondent noted similar frustration:

I feel that the church should be right at the forefront on it, and it's very frustrating when you find that people are dragging their feet rather than being out there, leading it. (Interview 34)

These quotations, from committed leaders who have driven their Eco-Congregation, demonstrate that members of the church are not always receptive to environmental messages. These same committed leaders, however, reported that over time and by leading through example, the environmental culture of their congregations changed. They felt that most people needed to be prompted to “make the connection between environmental values and their faith” (Interview 12). A small number of people begin to shape an emerging culture of environmental literacy that, over time, may become entrenched. As one minister suggested, “I think [when we] do these things then eventually just through sort of intuition or whatever ... more people are aware and get involved” (Interview 29). She went on to suggest, “It's kind of ingrained now and well in our sense, in the congregation. There are certain things set up now that I think it would be quite hard to go back on.” Eco-Congregations is a process through which the ideas of congregation-level citizenship shift through time, until eventually environmental care becomes part of the “rules of the game” (Hargreaves, 2011). This relies, as the above quotations suggest, on making explicit the link between faith and eco-activity, be it through a gardening project that energises children to care for creation, a refurbished and more comfortable hall in which to welcome community groups, or a continual drip-drip of environmentally themed services: there is a necessary connection between changing material processes and changing norms of citizenship (Shove, 2010).

Moving to a larger scale, participating in ECS was understood to express and re-invigorate the leadership of the broader federation of Christian churches. A key part of the programme is that it is presented as a movement, an alliance of like-minded congregations. Even those starting out or engaging with baseline actions can feel they are expressing a broader commitment. As one minister said:

Eco-Congregations is whatever you want it to be. You can go all out for everything marvellous like [anonymised] – they have won awards – or you can just feel you are part of the movement, and that is where we are in [anonymised]. We are part of the movement. (Interview 13)

As a result, groups often saw their role as “part of modernising the church,” making it fit for the challenges of the “twenty-first century” and to “reflect what's happening in the world out there” (Interview 26). In this description, “the church” functions as an interchangeable representation of both a denominational identity as well as a generic network of all Christian churches. The majority opinion was that the church should be leading by example, highlighting another implicit citizenship norm which we call “witness.” One minister put it this way: “I think it's good for Christians to have an upfront presence in this sort of thing because, like you say, the church has a dreadful public image that is very much removed from this world and it's not. It's very much part of this world” (Interview 17). Our respondents sought to affirm ways that their participation in ECS might help to re-pristiniate the reputation of the (abstractly conceived) Church. In this way, demonstrating Jenkins’ “prophetic pragmatism” (Jenkins, 2013), the use of inherently conservative values like “stewardship” can serve as a tactic to draw in non-committed individuals to take up pro-environmental actions and lifestyles.

At the largest scale, duties of citizenship encompassed temporally and spatially distant others. This was expressed most commonly through links to other churches overseas, particularly in Malawi, a country with long-standing links to Scotland. One long-term group leader suggested the following:

Why do we do it? The earth needs guardians like us, people to show the way. Yes, it is about loving our neighbour. When we go to Malawi, we help people there design and install solar power using tin, black paint, glass – local waste materials. We give regularly, and are in daily contact with people in Malawi installing solar panels. (Interview 40)

Care for the distant other was not only extended across space, but also time. Though, as we have observed elsewhere, active members of Eco-Congregations most often have a strong “presentist” orientation (Kidwell & Northcott, 2018), they do in some instances align their concern in relation to future persons. As one respondent suggested:

It [climate change] is a serious issue and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to be sensible and not be burning lights all the time ... we all have to be conscious of these things. (Interview 12)

Another respondent recalled a sermon in which they attempted to integrate environmental concern:

That was one of the things we pushed, that was the title of one service, that ‘small things can make a difference’ ... there is a passage in our most recent service again emphasising this message, and talking of stories in the past emphasising the effects that our actions now will have on our children and grandchildren. (Interview 26)

As these responses indicate, expressions of care for future generations usually remained within existing social relations (grandchildren, friends in Malawi); tangible connections were more important than abstract concepts of intergenerational equity.

Across these scales (congregation, church, distant others), citizenship was expressed in synthesis with values and practical actions. For example, the value of global environmental justice did not exist in isolation, but was expressed through practical actions and development-related work with specific churches overseas. Such actions scaled up to support expressions of solidarity with spatially and temporally distant others affected by climate change. As we have suggested at the outset, this marks a methodological reversal of previous studies of pro-environmental action as it crosses boundaries of scale. To summarise: small-scale community-level concerns are the most frequent motivation for Eco-Congregations to become eco-active. However, this parochial focus does not prevent groups from being motivated by more cosmopolitan concerns for distant persons and places. Groups are negotiating their eco-theo-citizenship in a multi-lateral way, crossing boundaries of scale and concurrently pursuing agendas at each level. With this multi-lateral dynamic in mind, we explore more specific ways that transformation of citizenship norms occurs in ECS in the next section.

5 | CHARACTERISTICS OF ECO-THEO-CITIZENSHIP

Having established the ways through which eco-theo-citizenship is constituted, we now discuss what makes this form of religious environmental action distinct. We highlight two key characteristics: the slow pace of change, and a culture of modesty.

5.1 | Process-oriented and “slow”

Eco-Congregations tend to focus on *process and structure* as much as environmental *actions*, such that groups are often sustained by their own ongoing processes and meetings, as opposed to goals or outcomes. One example of process-orientation is the way in which Eco-Congregation groups willingly participate in the registration and curriculum process managed by the central ECS staff, which may lead to awards. One could see this process of filling out applications and completing reports as a way of looking busy without achieving measurable change, and many ECS groups do seem to be highly skilled at navigating these kinds of bureaucratic processes. Yet, many respondents highlighted the process of completing the curriculum and receiving awards as an important factor for growth. One experienced coordinator reported that, at first, the structure of delivering reports and receiving awards seemed unimportant, but after an initial period her group “found it gave us a motivation and it was fun meeting these criteria; it was a good thing to do, going for the awards” (Interview 37). This emphasis on process can imbue ECS groups with a sense of purpose. As another interviewee suggested:

We've got three awards. [Our town] is tiny – it is easier in a tiny place, people think, oh, we just have to get on with it we don't expect someone else to do it. (Interview 40)

The point here is that small groups may also choose to participate in structured and bureaucratic activities because it provides them with an opportunity to represent the wider church community.

There are two ways of interpreting this emphasis on process and structure. On one hand, groups may be simply integrating secular environmental management into the church's existing bureaucratic processes. Ninety-five per cent of church groups participating in ECS come from “structured” denominations; that is, groups which have some form of bureaucracy or hierarchical structure (Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic), as opposed to non-denominational or non-hierarchical churches (Ecumenical partnerships, Baptists, independents, Quaker, or Unitarian). In one example, a respondent from a Scottish Episcopal church indicated how a process-oriented workflow dovetailed with denominational bureaucracy:

Something came out from the Diocese suggesting that congregations did something for the environment. At that stage I was on the vestry and [anonymised] said, ‘would you like to have a look into this?’ It happened that a few weeks later there was an environmental event in the [anonymised], and when I got there who did I meet but the Eco-Congregations people from [anonymised], which at that stage was still beginning to get going, and I thought, well, this links in with what we have been asked to do by the Diocese. (Interview 41)

In this narrative, the genesis of this group is not described as environmentally motivated, but in pragmatic terms. Notably, this interviewee had a background in local government, and thus some skill in navigating bureaucratic processes. We find that the forms of environmental action ECS groups take up tend to match the broader organisational constitution of their denominational networks. Rather than a Catholic/Protestant distinction being a key differentiating factor, we suggest that levels of familiarity with organisational politics, bureaucracy and hierarchical structure seemed more important than denominational affiliation (DeLashmutt, 2011; cf Hagevi, 2014).

There is, however, another way to read this process/structure orientation. As practice-theory based studies show, many environmental and activist groups may have a “community building” focus that displaces strong orientations around issues (Smith & Pulver, 2009). In one example, Anderson (2004) highlights the importance of ritual and space in the formation and maintenance of radical activist identity. Building on this, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010, p. 476) argue that political identities in autonomous social centres and tenants’ networks groups were “constituted through the everyday practices of doing activism in particular projects and campaigns, rather than political identities pre-existing fully formed.” Some individuals that we interviewed tended to see this emphasis on process and structure as an inevitable but unwanted limitation (inherited from their broader church culture) and that their work was not sufficiently radical. This combined with a lack of appreciation or awareness that such an orientation might lead to the generation of “more stable and long-term spaces” that Chatterton and Pickerill suggest are strongly desired by the secular groups they studied (2010, p. 484). We would argue that the focus on structure might represent a relative (and under-appreciated) strength, and moreover note (as we explore further below) that the long-run temporality of inter-generational church community may provide a crucible in which longer-term change can be nurtured.

Sustaining community coherence is time consuming, occasionally distracting, but ultimately a form of environmental change. This process of cultivating community was uniformly described as slow:

People are gradually waking up to the idea ... But it is a slow process and I understand very well trying to get the message across. I think it's slow and sometimes painful ... (Interview 11)

This was echoed by another minister:

I think there's an awful lot that's changed since I came, but it's gradual and it's slow – far slower than I would have wanted it, but maybe the only effective way is to take it slowly. (Interview 23)

These quotations demonstrate that eco-theo-citizenship takes time to emerge through the combination of practical actions, theological values and commitment to cultural change; many respondents voiced their frustration with how slowly this happened. Superficially, the word “slow” might imply an inefficient or unmotivated group. However, these groups also explicitly related slowness to their theory of change and longer-run temporal perspective:

I think Christians deal in doing things with intentionality. That's very good in some respects, but it also means when it comes around to doing relatively simple things sometimes ... the whole mechanism starts turning very slowly and you get caught up in it. (Interview 30)

Another respondent similarly suggested:

One of the benefits of the church is [that] it can transcend that short-term vision of ‘what is there,’ and say, well, actually our vision is longer term, and it comes from much further back, and there is this continuum going forward. It is a matter of faith. (Interview 18)

People involved in Eco-Congregations were often not working towards a very specific, defined objective, but instead were focused on sustaining the ongoing activity and accumulation of small achievements towards an open-ended goal. This means that ECS groups can persist beyond changing political conditions, as one long-term leader suggested:

What is coming down the road towards us. But whatever comes down the road the readings tell us is part of God's plan and we are to be with Him. (Interview 40)

In many cases, groups were aware (and possibly self-conscious) that they might be perceived as “slow” in their work, but they also took this up as a mark of theological conviction and unique group identity.

5.2 | Modesty and witness

The final feature we wish to highlight relates to a code of modesty, which can undermine reporting of achievements. As noted above, members of Eco-Congregation groups may have multiple affiliations. ECS group members are often active members of other environmental groups – indeed this is reflected in the weight attached to community outreach as a core ECS value. Rather than assume that environmental groups within a given area (permaculture, Greenpeace group, Transition Town, community garden, and so on) are self-contained social units, such groups often have porous boundaries, may share resources, and often have overlapping objectives. In one case, members of an Eco-Congregation were also founding members of a local development trust (which instigated a successful community wind project). When asked whether there was some overt connection between church membership and the development trust, the interviewee suggested:

[We] work within certain scriptures and structures that [we are] unable to break free from, and have difficulties attracting certain funding pools that a voluntary organisation is able to go for. So, for that purpose we set up a meeting, basically, and founded the development trust. So yes, it kind of came through the churches, but it wasn't formally done that way. The church or churches didn't sit down and say, 'Let's form a development trust.' (Interview 16)

This instance is indicative of wider trends in which there is overlap of resources and personnel between an Eco-Congregation and a secular environmental group. Within this overlap, the Eco-Congregation can often serve as a silent or even invisible partner. The Eco-Congregation mentioned in the above quotation did mention a small wind turbine in their formal report, but made no mention of the wider impact of the group.

As Koehrsen (2017) suggests, sustainability transitions can often be helped by the formation of experimental niches, where novel ideas can be tested on a smaller scale. Religious communities are good candidates for niche building. We found this kind of activity underway in several instances, but want to also underscore the way that niche formation was often an accidental consequence of a theological conviction. Among our interviewees, we found a common conviction that one's values should be communicated indirectly in a non-propositional demonstration of good works, described as “witness.” In this way of thinking, one does not press others to change, but rather demonstrates the possibility and appeal of a valorous alternative. Many interviewees described their activities in terms such as “the usual things” (Interview 10), “tiny things” (Interview 26) or “elementary” (Interview 36), or downplayed their achievements:

We have been one [a registered Eco-Congregation] for just over two years. We don't do all that much really. We haven't applied for an award. We've thought about it but we haven't actually got round to it. (Interview 41)

Despite the interviewee's modesty, this group has taken on a variety of highly significant forms of carbon reduction, cutting the carbon footprint of their building by 30%. This code of modesty and indirect strategy for wider social change was reflected by the majority of interviewees, who felt that the church should be witnessing, rather than overtly leading socio-environmental change. As one minister suggested:

To me, Christianity is about getting on doing all this stuff just because that's what you do. You don't go and say, 'Oh, look what we're doing,' 'aren't we clever' sort of thing. We're doing this, we're doing that, and we do the next thing. And so you sort of fade into the background ... the church is in fact working away and caring for its people. (Interview 35)

This was the case with several Eco-Congregations we interviewed, who had followed a slow and structured path to affixing solar panels to the roof of their buildings. Interviewees often attached more importance to the notion of witnessing through solar panels than to quantitative carbon reduction. When pressed, respondents observed that other community

members who had subsequently purchased solar installation for their homes had done so because of the public “witness” on a church building.

Overall, Eco-Congregations were a key contributor in sustaining smaller actions that served as a catalyst for broader change within the community:

Some of the [secular environmental] groups that are tremendously successful actually were in locations where transition type work – but not under that banner – had already been taking place, so to speak. They managed to piggyback on to that and then move forward. (Interview 20)

This underscores how Eco-Congregations provide a set of material resources which can, often unacknowledged, provide a key basis from which wider environmental activities can grow (Bomberg & Hague, 2018). As the interviewee reports, this kind of piggy-backing means that members of Eco-Congregations often understate their wider impacts. One consequence of this modesty is that secular and higher-level actors can underestimate the capabilities of Eco-Congregations, treating them instead as an avenue for dissemination and outreach but not resourcing. ECS clearly provides a supporting structure through which small, co-operative, incremental actions begin to take on wider meaning through witnessing to and supporting secular groups.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article we have sought to benefit from the personal emphasis latent in values-based approaches, while also drawing on the ability of practice-based approaches to appreciate slower and more subtle forms of behaviour change, alongside the political nuance provided by citizenship-based approaches. We have also resisted the tendency to focus on catalysts or tipping points which might be taken to enable behaviour change, and instead have focussed on the content of ongoing community building. On this basis, we termed the complex of action assessed in this study “eco-theo-citizenship,” in which eco-action, theological beliefs and citizenship were articulated in a mutually reinforcing spiral. Furthermore, and in contrast to the individualistic focus of behaviour-change models, we find that these three are constituted in and through community participation and outreach. Eco-Congregations can provide a crucial support for incremental, slow change which feeds into wider, longer-term efforts at community building on local, national and international scales. There are a number of parallels with non-religious environmental groups, and there is a need for future research to continue to analyse these symmetries (including the possibility of negative/positive spillover effects with REMOs; Nash et al., 2017). For the persons who make up Eco-Congregations, participating with a group in making small changes to the environmental life of and community-building activities within a congregation seems to grow upwards into a firmer expression of values, which in turn reinforce the practices undertaken as part of the Eco-Congregation process. These are also made sense of through expressions of citizenship, joining in with a wider sense of community and the church's role in tending to the needs of both local and distant others. The relative slowness and quiet nature of the modest witness means that where ECS participates in horizontal networks, pursuing interventions which are justified by appeals to overlapping accounts of higher common goods such as justice, this participation may not be visible.

Eco-Congregation Scotland groups may present resources for climate change mitigation such as community or group-level resilience and cohesion, which can be difficult to detect and harder still to metricise. By generating “stable and long-term spaces” (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010), ECS groups can provide an avenue for achieving good stewardship of creation and social justice, whether this is incubated on a small scale and then replicated elsewhere in the community, or through the generation of a project which remains small for many years before finally taking hold and growing to community-level scale. ECS group members commonly expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of their work and the small scale of their impacts, and often themselves failed to appreciate the potential of their work to have broader impact. This is a problem for group morale in some cases. However, there are also wider policy implications tied to the failure to recognise the unique features of these groups, as slow, structured and modest. As the broader discourse around climate change mitigation continues to emphasise rapid response to urgent and worsening crises, and as community-level funding and other policy instruments continue to focus on metricised carbon reduction and brief 12-month project horizons, public policy engagements will struggle to maximise their engagements with Christian communities on environmental issues. Taking into account the realities of eco-theo-citizenship as we have observed them will likely require policy-makers to take on a new level of risk, supporting longer projects whose outcomes are more difficult to measure quantitatively.

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