

**STORIES OF HOPE: INTERVENTIONS OF THE CHURCH IN
ECOJUSTICE CHALLENGES AND THE PATH TO ADDRESS
THE TOA ALTA LANDFILL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

by

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STORIES OF HOPE: INTERVENTIONS OF THE CHURCH
IN ECOJUSTICE CHALLENGES AND THE PATH TO ADDRESS THE TOA ALTA
LANDFILL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Stories of Hope: Interventions of the Church in Ecojustice Challenges and the Path to Address the Toa Alta Landfill Environmental Crisis

by

Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira

Ecojustice and ecotheology call us to take care for creation as a serious responsibility that God has entrusted us towards nature and humans. The intent of this project is to explore the different ways in which some specific churches in Puerto Rico face environmental challenges. The ecotheology of Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff in light of Scripture is the theological framework of this investigation. What can the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico learn about ecojustice as it engages leaders from other congregations that are also actively advocating in favor of ecojustice? The methods used in the project were those often associated with ethnographic studies. Eco-Justice focus group interviews from other churches in light of their experiences dealing with Eco Justice produce four study lessons for Toa Alta (The Ecostories). The project's design allowed me to gather the congregation in Toa Alta for a series of ecojustice lessons and reflect on practical ecotheology with a diverse theoretical approach, specifically from the scientific and ecological theory framework.

The questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the study lessons series in the Toa Alta congregation reflect that the participants had deepened their understanding of ecotheology and ecojustice concepts after this learning process. The last interviews with the Toa Alta group determined what concepts and ideas they had learned concerning ecojustice issues, ecotheology, and hope. The data collected in the interviews helped to outline three types of patterns and similar interventions in ecojustice issues: (1) Ecojustice Intervention Pattern, (2) Dealing with Resistance to Ecojustice Issues Inside the Congregation and (3) Intervention to Address the Toa Landfill Environmental Crisis. Toa Alta participants had identified steps and ways to intervening, they had reflected together and constructed their own intervention for addressing the landfill environmental crisis from the new knowledge acquired. Ecojustice leaders and the Toa Alta Participants learned from the ecostories that they are not alone, that there are more communities and churches seeking ways to deal with environmental problems, and that we can learn from each other and implement in our congregations what best appeals and adapts to our own community and context.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AES	Applied Energy Solutions
BFI	Browning Ferries Industry
CCDOCPR	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico
CCDOCA	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales, Arecibo
CCDOCE	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Espinosa, Dorado
CCDOCHN	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo
CCDOCTA	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta
UECT	United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas
COAI	Anti-Incineration Organizations Coalition
CORCO	Commonwealth Oils Refining Company
DNER	Department of Natural and Environmental Resources
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EQB	Environmental Quality Board
PRASA	Puerto Rico Aqueduct Sewer Authority
PREPA	Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority
PRISA	Puerto Rico National Ecumenical Movement
RUS	Rural Utilities Services
TAMSWL	Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USGS	United States Geological Survey
VEGOVE	Guaynabo Residents Against the Landfill in Hato Nuevo

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The church faces a time of accelerated changes on Earth. Multiple challenges at the dawn of the 21st century are related to the environmental pollution crisis that caused climate change at both the global and local levels. The loss of agricultural land, climate migration and refugees, wars over water rights, displacement of communities caused by the rising of the sea levels, severe droughts, and extreme hurricanes are among these multiple factors at global levels. These challenges include a component of justice for planetary ecosystems and for people who inevitably suffer from environmental degradation. This planetary emergency deserves to be tended to by the Church whose role is to serve our neighbor like Christ would do, and as if that neighbor was Christ him/herself. In Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island, real experiences of climate change are intertwined with and caused by political, social, and economic realities that we shall examine further. Environmental problems have affected the life of entire communities and ecosystems that are valuable to the island and these problems have become exacerbated. This research was carried out entirely in Puerto Rico, within communities in the North and South of the island. These communities will be introduced later.

Standing by the communities that are suffering because of environmental problems, should not be an option but rather a ministerial duty of the Church. Ecojustice as a value for the communities that suffer and for the Earth must be affirmed and worked from the faith and from the practical theology that the church currently practices. What can the church do in the face of this challenge on the planet? How can the churches make a contribution to the communities that

suffer from environmental problems in Puerto Rico? How can hope be found in the midst of these environmental problems from the perspective of faith? What can we learn from churches that have inserted themselves in the environmental fight, together with their communities? How can we achieve a collaborative learning process between churches that have stood by their communities to face environmental problems and churches that are beginning to do so or have not done so yet?

Hypothesis and Question

The intent of this project is to explore the different ways in which some specific churches in Puerto Rico face these environmental challenges and how they ought to show care and concern about such issues. In sharing the ecostories of these congregations and their experiences with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico (CCDOCTA) congregation we can find a collaborative learning path between congregations in the communities facing environmental issues that can help others in similar situations. The water and air pollution of the Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill— which will be referred to as Toa Alta Landfill—are detrimental to the health of both human beings and the ecosystem. This research seeks to learn about ecojustice and the opportunities that might arise when the community faces environmental challenges such as those endured by the people in Toa Alta. What can the CCDOCTA learn about ecojustice as it engages leaders from other congregations that are also actively advocating in favor of ecojustice? This is the main question in this research. The hypothesis states that the CCDOCTA can learn as a church from other congregations that have stood by their communities in the environmental struggles that they had faced and continue to face. The ecostories in this research and the Toa Alta environmental challenge are part of a broader context of the island of Puerto Rico.

The Puerto Rican Context

Puerto Rico is a beautiful island in the Caribbean Sea. It is the smallest of the Greater Antilles. Puerto Rico, politically speaking, is currently a territory of the United States since the North American invasion in 1898. Puerto Rico was transferred to the United States in the Treaty of Paris and, from being a colony of Spain since 1493, it became a colony of the United States from 1898 to the present. The Environmental Atlas of Puerto Rico points out that the geological diversity of soils and climate of the island contribute to the diversity of forests and natural systems where the conditions for plant growth are optimal and are reflected in its dense vegetation, productive and rich in species.¹ Some have classified the island as a tropical paradise. All this wealth in rivers, forests, plains, and mountains has witnessed a long history of colonialism.

Colonial and Decolonial Realities

We cannot talk about postcolonialism in the reality of Puerto Rico for we are still a colony of the United States of America. The colonial reality of the island and the decolonial approaches for Puerto Rico are in constant reflection of our own identity as Puerto Ricans. For instance, the decolonial approach affirms the Puerto Rican identity and identifies the ideologies of the colonial project. Puerto Rico has a valuable heritage from the *Taíno*, African, and Spanish legacy as a result of its colonial history. Puerto Rico is under the absolute power and control of the Congress of the United States, Puerto Ricans became citizens of the United States in 1917 by imposition. The main language of the island is Spanish, even though in the first decades of the United States

¹ Tania del Mar López Marrero and Nancy Villanueva Colón, *Atlas Ambiental de Puerto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2006), 12.

domination, English was the language taught in schools. This resistance to being absorbed by the cultural dominating force of the empire has been a constant for Puerto Ricans.

The Christian Church had a key role in the U.S. colonization project. Beyond the connection between the empire, the subjugated people, and the use of American religion for its colonization efforts, the true essence of the message of Christianity, however, had a liberating aspect that provided guidance to the Puerto Rican people. This required a decolonizing process of the brand of Christian religion and theology brought to the colony. José D. Rodríguez, in arguing against colonial Christianity, quotes Dr. Jorge L. Bardegüez and argues that, the power of Latin America liberation theology can provide a decolonizing theology in Puerto Rico.² The Puerto Rican Christian Church had evolved in spite of the decolonizing processes. The decolonizing process does not mean a rejection of all that we have assimilated but a rejection of all that minimizes our identity and self-esteem as Puerto Rican people.

The last decades of the past century were prosperous in economic development, population growth, and new projects of construction, affirmation of our culture and development in arts and education. However, not all these developments were planned to grow in harmony with the environment. All this progress and development has been affected by a debt that the political parties in the leadership of Puerto Rico have mismanaged. Congress created The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico (FOMBPR) to manage the debt process. This process is much more complex than the way it is described here, but this is part of the colonial reality that Puerto Rico endured in the first decades of the 21st century. The colonial

² José D. Rodríguez, "Decolonizing Theology: The Case of Puerto Rico," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Vol. 16 Issue 9 (November 10, 2016), <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1183>.

aspect of Puerto Rico clashed with the economic, social, ethnical, and environmental realities of Puerto Rico.

Economic, Social, Cultural, and Ethnic Realities

The economic, social, cultural, and ethnic reality of Puerto Rico is very rich, diverse and complex. According to the Red State Data Center of Puerto Rico, the population of the 78 municipalities of Puerto Rico decreased between 5% to 2% from July 1, 2017 (before hurricanes Irma and María) to July 1, 2018.³ Many young, working-age families have moved to the United States in search of better job opportunities and better education for their children. Economic distress is a constant in the current economic reality of Puerto Rico. The FOMBPR implemented strong austerity measures to the people on the island. The picture became even more complicated when in January 2020, a 6.4 Earthquake occurred in the south of the island. The Puerto Rican spirit of struggle, which has been the result of so much pain endured on account of the colonialism of two empires in more than 600 years, has been strong and vigorous.

A pattern of pollution and environmental degradation problems is observed in the poorest sectors, but also in the places of the coastal plains where there are more people of Afro-Caribbean descent. This makes us think not only of environmental justice due to economic factors but also environmental racism due to racial and ethnic factors. Communities that fight for ecojustice not only face a lack of economic resources, they also face rejection for the race they represent in a society that wants to make Afro-Caribbean descent invisible, deny their indigenous descent, and perpetuate colonialism by privileging European descent.

³ Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico. “Población de los 78 Municipios decrece entre 2% al 5% del 2017 al 2018,” news release, April 18, 2019, San Juan, Puerto Rico, <https://censo.estadisticas.pr/Comunicado-de-prensa/2019-04-18t111519>.

This investigation will show us glimpses of the titanic struggle of communities in the coastal plains of Puerto Rico. The ecostories of these churches and their communities show us how, within the social and structural schemes of evil and injustice, the liberating message of the Gospel makes the force of living hope emerge to continue fighting. We will also see how the church of Toa Alta, overwhelmed by the contamination, opens up to be acquainted with the ecostories of other churches that have fought for ecojustice in their communities. These ecostories and the possibilities for the affected communities in our Puerto Rico can be a motivation to continue fighting and caring for the entire creation.

Environmental Context

The ecojustice struggles were a new form of resistance to the colonial implementation of economic models on the island. Puerto Rico, as a colony, was used as an experimental terrain for many projects of the United States. García López, Concepción, and Torres Abreu share that:

The first environmental struggles in Puerto Rico began in the sixties from organizations like “Mission Industrial” and PRISA with affected communities against industrial and “touristic” projects that threaten the public health. “Mission Industrial” and the ecumenical organization PRISA were very important in forming and mobilizing the community.⁴

The Church’s ecumenical organizations were at the roots of the environmental movements in Puerto Rico. This interesting fact generates more questions about why other religious sectors have not been involved in ecojustice issues on the island. This project examines the involvement of the Church in ecojustice issues in their communities in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico was far from achieving a sustainable development, balancing creation care and economic development. López Marrero and Villanueva Colón state that the island suffered

⁴ Gustavo García López, Carmen M. Concepción and Alejandro Torres Abreu, eds. *Ambiente y Democracia en Puerto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2018), 21.

conflicts that emerged in the 1960s in Puerto Rico because the island did not have, at the time, environmental laws to protect the ecosystems and the people.⁵ The government of Puerto Rico created the Environmental Policy Act Law No. 9 of June 1970 establishing The Environmental Quality Board (EQB).⁶ Puerto Rico approved this law and created the EQB in Puerto Rico six months before the EPA was created in the United States. There is another agency in Puerto Rico, the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) of Puerto Rico. The law that created this agency was Law No. 23 of June of 1972. Its purpose is the operational implementation of the public policy of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico concerning natural resources.⁷ The environmental laws in Puerto Rico, including local and federal laws, were a huge step in their context and time.

The financial crisis in the beginnings of the 21st century consolidated the EQB under the DNER. Pérez-Méndez affirms that Governor Roselló consolidated the Solid Waste Authority, the National Parks Administration, The Model Forest, and the EQB under the DNER by means of Law 122 in 2017. The process was completed in 2018.⁸ Most of the ecostories in this investigation took place before 2018; others are still on going.

The history of the opposition for the mining intentions in the mountains of the island was another story in the environmental struggles on the island. García López, Concepción and Torres Abreu state that *Casa Pueblo*, an environmental organization in Adjuntas, fought against mining

⁵ Tania del Mar López Marrero and Nancy Villanueva Colón, *Atlas Ambiental de Puerto Rico*, 151.

⁶ *Ley sobre Política Pública Ambiental*, Lex Juris, Ley Num. 9 June 18, 1970. <http://www.lexjuris.com/LEXMATE/ambiental/lexleyambiental.htm>.

⁷ Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales, *Historia del DRNA*, <http://drna.pr.gov/historico/resena>, accessed April 1, 2020.

⁸ Osman Pérez Méndez, “Gobernador Crea la Sombrilla del DRNA,” *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR), 3 August 3, 2018, <https://www.pressreader.com/puerto-rico/primera-hora/20180803/281951723631315>.

projects since 1980. In 1995, a bill prohibiting open sky mining in Puerto Rico was approved. When the intense social and community struggle ended, this initiative was the first community organization to administrate a forest reserve.⁹ *Casa Pueblo* is one of many examples of community organization and victory against greedy interests that deprave the Earth.

The problem of toxic waste disposal was and continues to be a serious problem in Puerto Rico. Alvarado León says that from 29 landfills on the island, only 10 fulfill the environmental laws, 19 of them do not comply and other 13 have closing orders from EPA.¹⁰ This reality worsens when only a minimum of the municipalities in Puerto Rico has recycling programs, even when recycling is law in Puerto Rico. Alvarado León indicates that recycling in Puerto Rico is under 15%, contrary to the 35% expected by the Recycling and Reduction of Solid Waste Law 70-1992.¹¹ For example, the Toa Alta municipality does not have a recycling program and has one of the landfills with a closing order from the EPA.

Puerto Rico has experienced many threats to its natural resources and harm to the health of the most disadvantaged sectors of the Puerto Rican society. Vieques is an interesting example of the degradation of a beautiful land and the resurrection of hope in the midst of discouraging circumstances. The environmental damage to the land is so severe that EPA has added the Vieques naval facility, Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Area, to its National Priority List (NPL)

⁹ Gustavo García López, Carmen M. Concepción y Alejandro Torres Abreu, eds. *Ambiente y Democracia en Puerto Rico*, 29.

¹⁰ Gerardo E. Alvarado León, Revisión de un Reglamento Establecería Nuevas Guías para Vertederos, *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), March 4, 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/revisiundeunreglamentoestablecerianuevasguiasparavertederos-2403661/>

¹¹ Ibid.

of the countries most contaminated hazardous waste sites.¹² The religious organizations and the accidental death of David Sanes were key elements in the ignition of the movement to claim the end of naval operation in Vieques. Delgado discloses that:

In May 2000, tens of thousands of people marched through the streets of Puerto Rican capital city, San Juan, in solidarity with the people of Vieques against the US naval presence and military activity on their island. Organized primarily through the efforts of ecumenical church leaders, the movement and its peaceful activism and protest was one of extensive outreach and solidarity that focused the world's attention on a local injustice.¹³

The efforts and unity of all sectors of the Puerto Rican society was a great example of courage and perseverance. Becker says that, under pressure from these nonviolent protests, the Navy agreed to leave Vieques on May 1, 2003.¹⁴ The cleaning of this site is far from being achieved, perpetuating the long-term the harm that has been done to Vieques.

Climate change is another huge challenge for Puerto Rico. Hurricane María taught us that climate change transforms everything. The impacts in the economy, society, physical and emotional health, and environmental aspects were impressive. Parés Ramos shares that Hurricanes María and Irma left 141 thousand million dollars in losses, thousands of deaths and many hardships in the Caribbean, specifically in Puerto Rico.¹⁵ The global concern about climate change is focused on the small communities around the island that are losing their coastal lands, due to the changes in agriculture and sustainability, and because of the extreme weather conditions. In the Global Climate Risk Index measured by German Watch, Puerto Rico appears

¹² Teresa Delgado, *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophecy Freedom* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 298. Kindle.

¹³ Ibid, 211.

¹⁴ Marc Becker, “*Vieques: Long March to People’s Victory*” accessed March 9, 2020, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/107/p503/>.

¹⁵ Isabel K. Parés Ramos, “Urgen Acciones Climáticas,” *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), March 17, 2019, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/ciencia/ciencia/nota/urgenaccionesclimaticas-2482520/>.

as the most affected country in the world for the year 2017.¹⁶ Being the country most affected by climate change on the entire planet should lead us to reflect on the risks and opportunities that this implies for Puerto Rico.

The Toa Alta Context

Toa Alta is one of the oldest towns in Puerto Rico. Located in the Northern part of the island, Toa Alta was founded in 1751.¹⁷ The town has diverse ecosystems with an important river and lake, La Plata. The United States Census Bureau informs that in 2018 Toa Alta had an estimated population of 71,094 people.¹⁸ The median housing income in Toa Alta is \$29, 672 in 2017, but 18.6% of the population earns less than \$10,000 annually.¹⁹ The amount of people in Toa Alta who live below the poverty level was 12,437, with an unemployment rate in this sector of 36.4%.²⁰ All these factors are part of the reality of a town that has dealt with environmental problems for a long time ago.

¹⁶ David Eckstein, Marie-Lena Hutfils, and Mike Wings, “Global Climate Risk Index 2019: Who Suffer Most for Extreme Weather Events? Weather Related Loss Events in 2017 and 1998-2017,” *German Watch*, Germany, December 2018, https://germanwatch.org/files/Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202019_2.pdf.

¹⁷ Petra Camacho Lozada, *Los Verdaderos Tesoros del Toa* (Toa Baja, Puerto Rico: Prisma Print, 2019), 41.

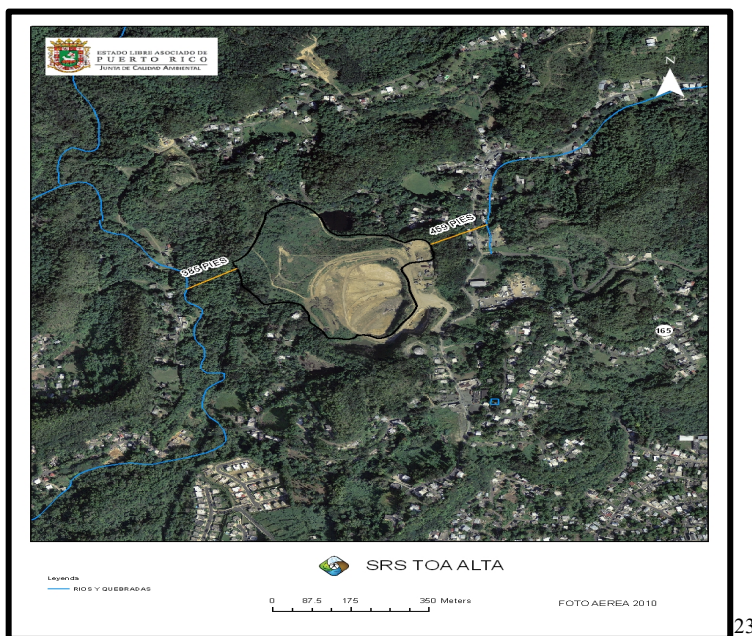
¹⁸ *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018*, American Fact Finder Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division Release Dates: For the United States, regions, divisions, states, and Puerto Rico Commonwealth, December 2018. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk.

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017*, American Fact Finder, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>.

²⁰ Ibid.

The Toa Alta Landfill

Toa Alta Sanitary Dump, now known as the Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill (TAMSWL), began decades ago. According to the EQB, the TAMSWL began to receive waste in 1973 and, it currently receives waste from various municipalities including, Toa Alta, Bayamón, Naranjito, Comerío, among others.²¹ Near the Toa Alta Landfill, there are several private family homes. Mugdan says that the closest residential housing to the Toa Alta Landfill's waste is some 20 meters from the Southwest side of the Toa Alta Landfill.²² The management of this site has not complied with environmental regulations and this behavior has exposed the communities near the Toa Alta Landfill to decades of air and water pollution. The next photo shows the nearest rivers, streams, and surface waters from the Toa Alta Landfill.



²¹ Ladesing Group, *Closure/Post-Closure Plan and Supporting Documents for Final Design for Closure/Post-Closure Plan, San Juan, Puerto Rico*, December 2015), 2.

²² Walter Mugdan, *Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill RCRA §7003 Order*, Docket No. RCRA-02-2017-7303, (New York, New York, 2017), 19.

²³ Environmental Quality Board of the Government of Puerto Rico, *SRS Toa Alta (Toa Alta Landfill) 2010*.

The Toa Alta Landfill is above one of the most important aquifers of Puerto Rico, the Northern Aquifer. The Toa Alta Landfill contaminated the water through leachate. Betancourt says that leachate is produced as a result of rainfall percolation, which dissolves soluble components such as hydrolyzed materials and degradation products from the waste.²⁴ The fact that when the Toa Alta Landfill began, the special liners to protect the ground waters from leachate and other contaminants were not required, is an important concern not only for Toa Alta but for other communities that feed from this Northern aquifer to supply water. Camacho says that the La Plata Lake is administered by the Puerto Rico Aqueduct Sewer Authority (PRASA) and supplies water to the metropolitan area.²⁵ The effects on groundwater pollution are enormous concerns for the community.

The neighbors in the area, with the help of the organization “Toalteños por la Salud” (TPLS) and the Legal Services Corporation represented by lawyer Armando Cardona, requested the closing of the Toa Alta Landfill given the constant violations and the lack of action from the municipality to fulfill the orders provided by the EQB.²⁶ In a letter dated April 18, 1995, the EPA answered Ms. Carmen Josefina Meléndez, President of TPLS, about the concerns over the maintenance of the Toa Alta Landfill and the possible expansion of the Toa Alta Landfill and her request that the EPA treated this as an environmental justice issue. She was told that the Puerto

²⁴ Luz Stella Betancourt Moreno, *Characterization of Leachate from Two Municipal Disposal Landfills in Puerto Rico and its Possible Impact on Nearby Soils and Groundwater Wells*, PhD diss., (University of Turabo, Caguas, PR, 2011), 1.

²⁵ Petra Camacho Lozada, *Los Verdaderos Tesoros del Toa*, 73.

²⁶ Ferdinand Lugo González, *Informe de Caso sobre Cierre de Sistema de Relleno Sanitario y Evaluación Ambiental de Sistema de Relleno Sanitario y Evaluación Ambiental*. Num. 98-3-4, Parte Querrellada Municipio de Toa Alta, Environmental Quality Board Government of Puerto Rico, (February 2002), 1.

Rican authorities must take responsibility for this issue²⁷ The community had made efforts to confront the municipal, state, and federal agencies to consider the Toa Alta Landfill site as one that is not complying with the environmental laws and one that ought to close.

The economic support that the Toa Alta Landfill operation meant for the municipality of Toa Alta influenced the decisions that had been made. The community resisted and finally saw hope in a new closing order, but this time issued by EPA in 2017. The document described the critical situation of the Toa Alta Landfill and the reasons for the closure decision.

The location of the Toa Alta Landfill adjacent to housing, within a seismic zone, in karst terrane, in steep topography, and on poor soil, and the risks of contamination to the underlying and adjacent aquifers and surroundings surface waters supplies, are among the factors that indicate that the handling and disposal of solid waste at the Toa Alta Landfill may present an imminent and substantial endangerment to human health and the environment. The lack of proper operational controls at the Toa Alta Landfill, including lack of daily cover, insufficient run-off controls, lack of leachate collection, lack of impermeable liners, lack of a groundwater monitoring plan, lack of explosive gases control, lack of adequate access controls, and the failure to address mosquito-borne disease transmission risk posed by the Toa Alta Landfill are other factors that indicate the handling and disposal of solid waste may present an imminent and substantial endangerment to human health and the environment.²⁸

The recognition of all this critical situation in the Toa Alta Landfill from de EPA was seen as the next step forward to deal with this real problem in the community. Banuchi says that this is a case of environmental justice and he compared the fact that the leachate is leaking to the La Plata River as one similar to the water problem in Flint, Michigan.²⁹ The drinking water obtained from the wells is also affected. The order says that there are two PRASA drinking water wells and 14

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Walter Mugdan, *Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill*, 20.

²⁹ Rebecca Banuchi, "Denuncian Caso de Injusticia Ambiental," *El Nuevo Día*, (San Juan, PR) June 12, 2016, 30.

USGS (United States Geological Survey)—listed groundwater wells within two miles of the Toa Alta Landfill.³⁰ The lack of monitoring and testing to the groundwater wells does not allow the identification of the contaminants present and if they are exceeding the permitted levels established by the EPA.

Luz Stella Betancourt, in her dissertation for the Doctor of Philosophy in Environmental Science, investigated the leachate components of two landfills from the Northern area of Puerto Rico, the Toa Baja and the Toa Alta landfills. Betancourt's investigation is significant because there is not much data collected in a formal investigation like her study. Betancourt says that Zn (Zinc) showed the highest relative concentration in both the Toa Alta and Toa Baja landfills.³¹ Betancourt says that in both Toa Alta and Toa Baja landfills, Cr (Chromium) and Pb (Lead) were found. These ions are toxic to all forms of life. The findings in this investigation were compared with the EPA agency limits for these elements. Betancourt says that the maximum levels of Zn found in the Toa Alta and Toa Baja lixivates are above the limits established by EPA.³² The investigation includes leachate and ground water well samples and the underground water also reflects contamination. Betancourt found that although the groundwater from the wells included in this study, meets the drinking water standards for most parameters, all groundwater samples collected exceed the maximum allowed limit for at least one primary or secondary drinking water standard, making it unsuitable for human consumption.³³ Cr is a potent carcinogen and Pb

³⁰ Walter Mugdan, *Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste Landfill*, 15.

³¹ Luz Stella Betancourt Moreno, *Characterization of Leachate from Two Municipal Disposal Landfills in Puerto Rico and its Possible Impact on Nearby Soils and Groundwater Wells*, 148.

³² *Ibid*, 150.

³³ *Ibid*, 193.

is carcinogenic and causes permanent damage to the central nervous system.³⁴ The data shared in the Betancourt's investigation and the long record of environmental violations in the Toa Alta Landfill resonate with the health statistics of Toa Alta municipality in terms of cancer and respiratory problems.

The correlation between the contamination and the health statistics in Puerto Rico would reveal a connection of cause and effect. Rodríguez says that Toa Alta belongs to the region of the island that has the highest incidence of cancer.³⁵ The municipality of Toa Alta belongs to the Bayamon Region in the Northern part of the island. This region was also the one in which cancer was the first cause of death in Puerto Rico in 2012, with a rate of 124 of every 100,000 inhabitants.³⁶ Cancer is a difficult and challenging illness. The CCDOCTA has had, in the last eight years, eleven persons who have survived cancer and one who died of this illness. The contamination of the Toa Alta Landfill could be contributing to the increase of certain illnesses in the population, including but not limited to cancer.

The neighbors waited and were cautious about the fulfillment of the EPA's order because of their past experiences with government agencies. The order, issued on April 11, 2017, specified that the municipality and the Municipal Co. shall permanently cease disposal at the Toa Alta Landfill no later than December 31, 2017.³⁷ In September 2017, an unexpected event

³⁴ *Ibid*, 166.

³⁵ Idania R. Rodríguez Ayuso, *Informe de Enfermedades Crónicas, Puerto Rico 2012*, Departamento de Salud, Estado Libre y Asociado de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR, (2012): 56. <http://www.salud.gov.pr/Estadisticas-Registros-y-Publicaciones/Publicaciones/Informe%20de%20enfermedades%20crónicas%20en%20Puerto%20Rico%202012.pdf#search=cancer%20Toa%20alta,>.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 83.

³⁷ Walter Mugdan, *Toa Alta Municipal Solid Waste*, 21 and 31.

changed the course of planning events for all in Puerto Rico. Hurricanes Irma and María hit the island and the damage done was unprecedented in modern times. The landfills of the island, many of them exceeding their capacity, like the one in Toa Alta, received all those waste materials. For Toa Alta, this was an obstacle for going through the plan for closing the Toa Alta Landfill.

The Asphalt Plant

The Asphalt Plant, Asphalt Solutions, has affected the respiratory health of the community of Residencial Piñas and the downtown neighbors, schools, and churches. The community had been dealing with many health issues including cancer, respiratory illness, and skin irritations. The Graduate School of Public Health (GSPH) of the Medical Science School of the University of Puerto Rico conducted a study in the community. The students of GSPH found that the residents of Residencial Piñas have more respiratory conditions (asthma, rinitis, and disnea) compared with the residents of Parcelas Nuevas.³⁸ Years ago, I met a new member of the CCDOC that lived in Residencial Piñas. I went to her house to meet her and she talked to me about her persistent skin irritations. She moved from Residencial Piñas to another part of Toa Alta. When I visited with her, she told me that her skin irritations were gone. She told me, “Pastor, I moved to a new place; my skin problems were caused by the pollution of the Asphalt Plant.”

The CCDOCTA has several children and youth who are students of the three schools in downtown and have been affected by the Asphalt Plant gases. Guillama Capella says that the Director of the elementary school, with 367 students registered, reported that the school had to

³⁸ Estudiantes de Maestría en Salud Pública con Especialidad en Bioestadística y Epidemiología, *Estudio de Salud en las Comunidades Residencial Piñas y Las Parcelas Nuevas de Barrio Piñas en Toa Alta, Puerto Rico* (Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública del Recinto de Ciencias Médicas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico Puerto Rico, 2019), 76.

be closed on six occasions due to 36 incidents of gases affecting the people in the schools and students and teachers had been taken to the hospitals in ambulances.³⁹ This is a violation of children's rights to get an education and to be in a healthy environment where they learn. The absence of participation of CCDOCTA as an organization in the fight for the ecojustice in the Toa Alta Landfill struggle has been a reality for decades. CCDOCTA has been more open to participate in the community problem of the Asphalt Plant pollution.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Congregational Context

The CCDOCTA was the first Protestant church in Toa Alta. The congregation began as a Presbyterian Church for the first eight years (1914-1922). The change to become a Disciples of Christ congregation came when the missionaries agreed to divide the island of Puerto Rico into several sections and each denomination would be assigned to a specific region. The exchange between these two denominations happened in 1922. The church in Toa Alta has served the community and proclaimed the message of the Gospel for the past 106 years. The church grew and built a new sanctuary in the 1960's. The CCDOCTA has been blessed with faithful leaders, women and men, with a high standard in their commitment to God and the church. At the same time, it has endured hard times that have allowed the church to reach maturity and growth in faith and love.

The CCDOCTA has currently 110 members and 18 children.⁴⁰ Of these 110 members, 26 are passive members which means that they cannot attend church because of health problems.

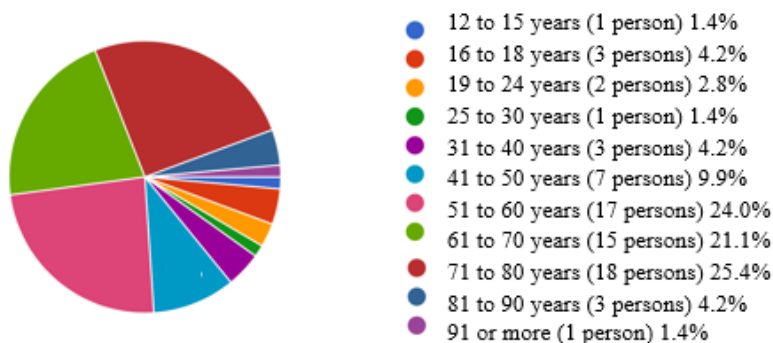
³⁹ Manuel Guillama Capella, "Barrio de Toa Alta Continúa su Lucha contra Malos Olores", *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR.), (May 7, 201): 4, <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/notas/barrio-de-toa-alta-continua-su-lucha-contra-malos-olores/>.

⁴⁰ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico, *Crezcamos en la Palabra, el Amor y el Servicio Libro de Informes* (Growing in the Word of God, love and service: Assembly Reports of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico, (Bayamón, PR, 2019) 81.

According to the Church Profile Document, the majority of the congregation is elderly. The distribution by age of the congregations is as follows:

Church Profile Document Data

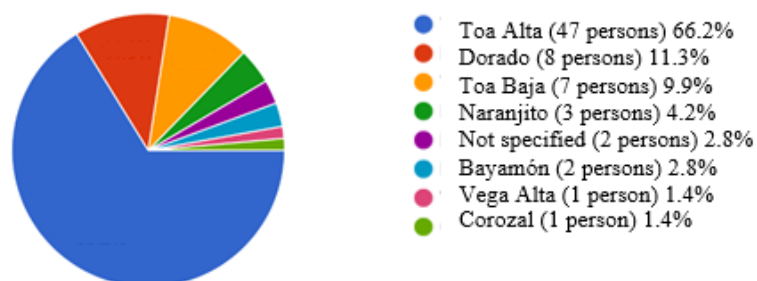
Figure 1: Distribution of age from 12 to 70 years in percentage of the CCDOCTA



The three age groups of 51-60, 61-70, and 71-80 years old represent 70.40 % of the congregation, showing that the largest group of people at church are elderly.⁴¹ This constitutes a blessing in the wisdom and guidance that this generation contributes with their commitment and example to younger generations. Also, it is an opportunity to seek ways to achieve balance and integrate the younger generations in the church's work and mission. The majority of the people of the CCDOCTA live in Toa Alta. The distribution is as follows:

⁴¹ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo en Toa Alta Pueblo. *Perfil de la Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Toa Alta Pueblo* (Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at Toa Alta's Profile, (Puerto Rico, 2020), 1-2. Document in author's possession.

Figure 2: Distributions of the Members of the CCDOCTA by Town of Residence



The majority of the people live in Toa Alta, about 66.2 % of the congregation; the rest live in towns near Toa Alta.⁴² If we consider the location of the majority of the members of the church, they are exposed directly or indirectly to one of the two sources of contamination in Toa Alta. There are many people in the congregation with asthma, respiratory problems, cancer survivors, and other health conditions. Toa Alta is in the second region in PR with a high prevalence of asthma. Pollution also affects the nervous system in certain levels of exposure to certain substances. Toa Alta is also the second region with the highest prevalence of depression, the highest being in Bayamón Region.⁴³ These facts represent challenges and opportunities to serve our community. Even though the church has members that have been affected by the Toa Alta Landfill problems for decades, it has not gotten involved as an organization with the community.

The main reason given by some members of the church for not getting involved is the desire of not mixing political issues with the church and the lack of hope of having any government action to solve the contamination problem of the Toa Alta Landfill. One or two

⁴² *Ibid*, 3.

⁴³ Idania R. Rodríguez Ayuso, *Informe de Enfermedades Crónicas, Puerto Rico 2012*.

members of the church have participated in the protests but as neighbors and not representing the church as an organization. The lack of hope in a struggle that has lasted for decades is understandable but is not supposed to be the last word.

Theological Implications

Creation care emerges from a reflection on the key role that congregations have in their communities, especially when these communities experience environmental problems. This investigation aims to examine our responsibility as Christian churches through the “green” lenses of a theology of creation, ecotheology, and the Bible.

The process includes a dialogue between ecotheology, environmental sciences, and ecojustice. The dialogue between different disciplines is necessary in confronting and deconstructing the complex challenges we face in our local communities as well as globally. The Bible is clear in the call for justice against the evil forces of greed that oppress the most vulnerable. The reflection on what the Bible says about caring for creation but also about our role in doing justice will be presented in the theological chapter. I went through the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to observe with “green” lenses the interaction between nature, human beings, and the Creator. The balance for the relationship between nature, humans, and the Creator is doing justice. Ecojustice includes justice for human beings and for the Earth. The concepts of different disciplines merge in the practical ecotheology that consists of reflection, discernment, and practicing ecojustice for all.

The Bible and lived experience are the source of Leonardo Boof’s and Ivone Gebara’s ecotheology and ecofeminism. These two theologians from Latin America will guide us with their insights toward a theology of creation that affirms life and justice in a holistic way. This investigation has provided an opportunity to rethink our relationship with creation and our

knowledge about it, as Ivone Gebara invites us to do. Boff invites us toward a reflection in the intersection of ecotheology and ecoliberation theology and our reflection in the practices as Church and the hard realities of injustices that confront entire communities. Examining Boff and Gebara's ecotheological approaches can guide us in the possibility of rescuing of hope for the Earth and for us. It requires a profound reflection in our theological understandings and in our sense of life to observe others that are dealing with similar circumstances to discern a path to rescue hope in the middle of devastation. To think in more communitarian ways, we need to see the others, the ones that have been invisible.

This investigation allows the interaction of ecostories of hope to be examined by the CCDOCTA in terms that they can reflect theologically in those experiences. The interaction between churches sharing the ecostories and affirming their ecotheological validation for their behavior from the biblical tradition is a matrix of a knowledge that we need to revise in our faith communities. The openness of this church to learn from other congregations in humbleness and expectation was the beginning of a reflection process for the whole church and for me as researcher and pastor of this congregation. The implications of the serious reflections in the collaborative path between churches can be a matrix of ecotheological reflections. This ecotheological matrix generates opportunities to live a practical ecotheology within our communities as we carry out the mission of the church incarnating the Body of Christ on Earth.

Methodology and the Ethnographic Approach

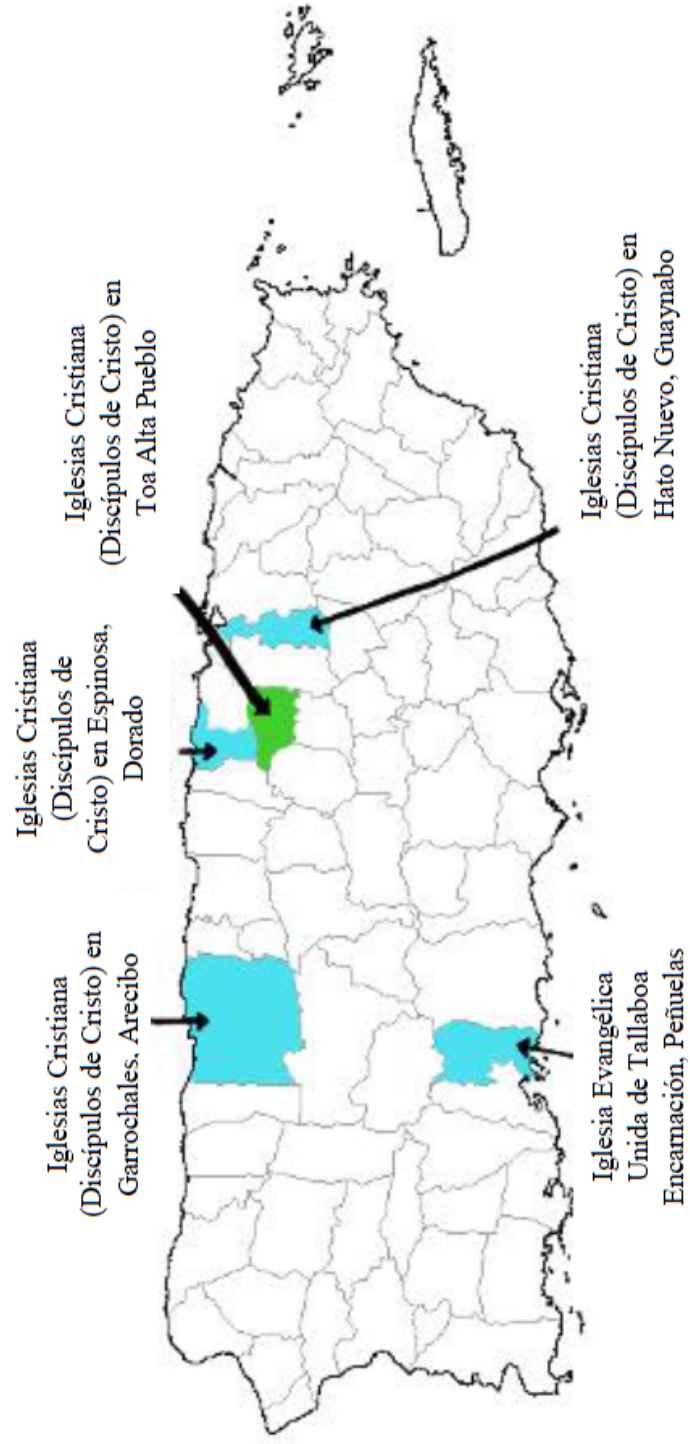
Churches that are active in ecojustice, whether they have prevailed in these issues or are still struggling, have engaged in a collaborative effort and shared their experiences and interventions

in their scenarios and contexts. Through the process of the investigation, the researcher collected ecostories, lessons, experiences, suggestions, and learnings from four churches:

- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo (CCDOCHN), Guaynabo, Puerto Rico.
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Espinosa (CCDOCE), Dorado, Puerto Rico.
- The United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa, Encarnación, (UECT) Peñuelas, Puerto Rico.
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arecibo (CCDOCA), Puerto Rico.

These four churches were represented by two to four leaders per church who conform the Ecojustice Focus Group (EJFG). The researcher prepared a series of four Bible lessons based on the four ecostories of the churches that participated in the EJFG interview. The CCDOCTA received the study lesson series put together using the recommendations, suggestions, and interventions of the EJFG during four Sundays in the Sunday Bible School time. After collecting the consents, we distributed a prequestionnaire and after ending the lessons, we distributed a post questionnaire to the participants. The week after we finished the series of lessons, we invited the participants to two focus group interviews for a deeper conversation.

Map: Christian Churches in Puerto Rico that Participated in the Investigation Project:
Stories of Hope: Church interventions for Ecojustice and the Challenge of the Environmental Crisis
Regarding the Toa Alta Landfill



This was designed to gain a deeper comprehension of ecotheology and ecojustice that the church may be able to consider in its own context. The following diagram is a summary of the process:

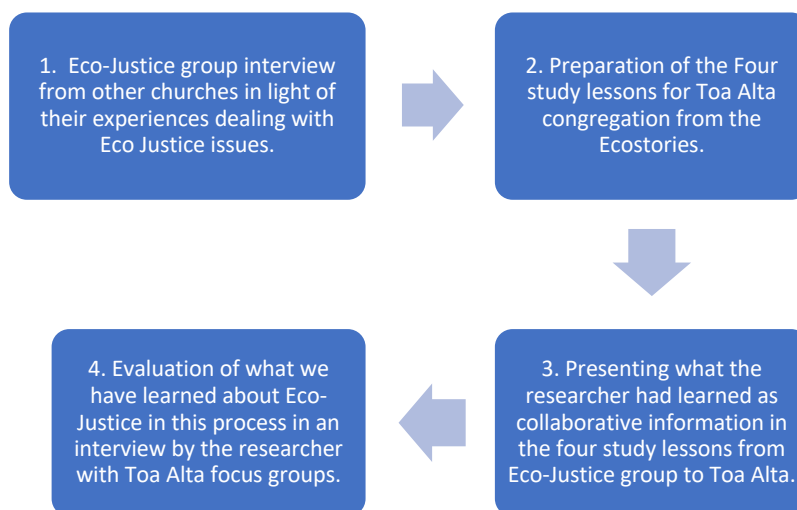


Diagram 1: Stages Order for the Project Process

The methods to achieve this project are the methods often associated with ethnographic studies. Every document handed to the participants had been approved by Texas Christian University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All the participants in the focus group interviews agreed to being recorded in video and gave their consent. The ethic of care with the participants and the process to do no harm were present in all the investigation process. Each participating church had brought new possibilities for understanding in these fields of ecotheology and ecojustice.

The ethnographic approach invites to observe how participants behaved, the nonverbal language during the interviews, and the interactions between all the participants. The evaluation process of this investigation has considered all these factors, because the questionnaires have been useful as well as the video records of the focus groups interviews. The integration of

qualitative data from the surveys and focus groups interviews were merged with the quantitative scientific data from studies, reports, and statistics.

The data collected in the interviews helped to outline patterns and similar interventions in ecojustice issues that the four churches shared in the interview. The questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the study lesson series in the Toa Alta congregation provided an opportunity to consider the understanding of ecotheology and ecojustice concepts before and after this learning process for the congregation. The last interview with the Toa Alta group determined what concepts and ideas they have learned concerning eco-justice issues, ecotheology, and hope.

The experience and novelty of this kind of theme and research were received with expectation and respect from all the participants of the different churches. The participants from the Ecojustice group were very responsible and motivated to help. Some facilitated historical documents, photos, and literature that had been produced in the struggle for ecojustice in their communities. The affirmation of the impossible challenges and the faith in God to face them, were a constant in the conversations. The solidarity and empathy that were shared in the focus group interview was an extraordinary experience for me as researcher.

The disposition, respect, and seriousness in which the CCDOCTA received the ecostories of other churches opened the path to consider these stories in light of the hard challenges that Toa Alta Pueblo has in the Toa Alta Landfill and Asphalt Plant environmental problems. The learning process of these collaborative paths of learning and the unexpected outcomes of this investigation will be shared in the following chapters. The eco-stories of hope are in continual construction in the intersections of practical ecotheology from our churches and the communities' claims for ecojustice.

CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS FOR ECOJUSTICE

All human beings have a challenging responsibility on behalf of all creation. The care of creation has been both a constant struggle and a challenge to sustain as we attempt to protect the creation of God against the malicious forces that lead to its abuse and destruction. Ecojustice calls us to take on the serious responsibility that God has entrusted us towards nature and humans. Justice inspires and guides social action ministries in churches. For decades, the ecological disaster on our planet has called for the attention of all sectors of society. The church is not exempt from this call as it holds a key role in denouncing the ecological sins, injustice, and depravation against the creation of God. The Bible establishes a stewardship principle early on in Genesis, showing care and respect for all forms of life.⁴⁴ The Bible thematizes its intent for humans to be the keeper of the earth. In other words, the Bible foregrounds the importance of justice for humans and for the rest of creation. For sure, as the Bible conveys, God gave us a precious gift in this beautiful place for us to live in and grow in harmony with the rest of the creation. Throughout the Bible, God continually calls humanity to treat human beings in fairness; a call that is extended to include all of creation, including animals, plants, and all of nature.

Ecotheology and ecojustice are present in the Word of God as a constant reminder to consider the order of creation and the call for a new relationship with nature; one that

⁴⁴ This project works with the assumption that Scripture governs every aspect of life including creation. Thus, the biblical texts, from Genesis to Revelation, are in conformity with the mind of God. Those principles that emerge from this reading serve, therefore, as “proofs” for an ecotheology.

exemplifies the relationships with God in regard to love, sustainability, and care for God's creatures. This chapter explores the biblical foundations for ecojustice based on the ecotheology of Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff in the light of Scripture and the challenging realities that we face nowadays on our planet, especially in the least protected areas and most distressed. Boff and Gebara are important theologians to speak on the theme of ecojustice because both have a long trajectory of developing ecotheology in the Latin American context.

Creation in the Biblical Tradition

The first assignment in my systematic theology class in the Master of Divinity was reading the Popol Vuh and write a reflection based on my experience with the text. The "Popol Vuh" according to *The Ancient History Encyclopedia* is the story of creation according to the Quiche Maya of the region known today as Guatemala.⁴⁵ I did not comprehend the assignment until I read in the "Popol Vuh" the flood story in its creation accounts.

The similarities between the flood story of the "Popol Vuh" with the biblical accounts of the flood story in Genesis are striking. This reading experience makes me reflect on the numerous creation accounts from the different ancient civilizations, especially those in the ancient near east, that many biblical scholars affirm influenced the compositional development of Genesis. Justo González, a Cuban American scholar, states that in the ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia, there were stories of the origins of things that were very similar to elements in the stories in Genesis.⁴⁶ As Egypt and Mesopotamia are near geographically to

⁴⁵ Joshua J. Mark, Popol Vuh, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, March 21, 2014, https://www.ancient.eu/Popol_Vuh/.

⁴⁶ William H. Willimon, ed. *Creation: The Apple of God's Eye. Belief Matters*, by Justo González. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015), 8-9.

Israel, thus explaining the intertextuality between the stories, “Popol Vuh” calls attention that civilizations in the New World like the Mayas might also be drawing a connection with other universal stories like the flood in Genesis or vice versa.

The creation accounts in Genesis 1-2:3 and 2:4-25 are inserted in the first part of the book of Genesis 1-11 and opens with creation stories for all its readers, setting the stage for also those interested in the particularities of the two creation accounts and the theology that these two accounts represent. Gordon John Wenham shares that simple and majestic, dignified yet unaffected, profound and yet perfectly clear, Genesis makes a superb introduction not only to the book of Genesis itself but to the whole Scripture.⁴⁷ The connection throughout the Scripture of creation and God’s love for it is a continuous reality in the Bible. The importance of the connections of the creation accounts to the whole Bible demonstrates the plurality of voices that harmonizes with the redactional process of Genesis and the sources and traditions that produce the final writings that we know today. Severino Croatto, a Latin American theologian, invites us to consider not only the original contexts and realities in which the text was written, but also suggests the reservoir of meanings that the text have for those who read it in different times and contexts.⁴⁸ The approach of Croatto is similar to Ivone Gebara’s invitation to embrace the new knowledge that emerges from rethinking our realities. Croatto’s approach to ecotheology is from a biblical hermeneutics approach of rereading the text in light of today’s issues. Gebara’s

⁴⁷ Metzger, Bruce M., Hubbard, David A, Barker, Glenn W., *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, *World Biblical Commentary* by Gordon John Wenham (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 37. Ebook.

⁴⁸ Lozada Francisco Jr. and Fernando Segovia eds. *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*. Num. 68 Society of Biblical Literature. Semeia Studies (Atlanta: SBL Press. 2014), 313 and 316. Ebook.

ecotheology approach is a more theological approach that constructs a standpoint in relationship between tradition, ecological justice, and ecofeminism.

How can I read the creation accounts of Genesis from the perspective of the Latin American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican realities in the times of climate change? What hermeneutical keys can help me understand the creation accounts in Genesis in the light of the struggles for ecojustice in the communities? How do the biblical creation accounts speak to me in my own context? Considering the redactional process of acquiring the final form of the text, the different layers of the text, can help us understand these important chapters and its theological point of view. And using the identity aspect as one key of interpretation and the interpretative key of the “poor” to guide my reading, along with the sacredness of creation, will inform my reading of the creation accounts.

When the Israelites were captive in Babylon, maintaining their customs and rituals was part of the resistance for avoiding the complete assimilation of the Hebrew people. In the context of the exile, while the community was struggling with the preservation of their identity, the link to the land of Israel and their faith in God helped them guide a process of theological affirmation of their faith. The oral and written Hebrew traditions play a key role in the transmission of the stories and the redaction of the Hebrew Bible increased during this period of Israel’s history. One of the distinctions that the Genesis creation accounts have differently from the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and other civilization stories of creation is the number of gods present in these stories. Gonzalez states that what Jews and Christians found objectionable in them was that they proposed a multiplicity of gods, or at least two eternal principles. In brief, the main interest of

both Jews and Christians was not how the world was made but who made it.⁴⁹ The monotheist doctrine of one God is an important difference and a factor of identity for the Hebrew People. Genesis 1-2:3 and 2:4-25 emphasizes God as the Creator of heavens and earth and everything that exists.

The redactional process considers with caution the affirmation of their religious identity as the people of Israel. For example, Genesis 1:16 mentions the creation of the moon and the sun in a different way. Wenham states that the worship of the sun, moon and stars was current throughout the ancient orient. Genesis pointedly avoids using the normal Hebrew words for sun and moon, lest they be taken as divine, and says instead God created the greater and the lesser light.⁵⁰ According to this literary perspective of the Genesis creation accounts the religious identity of the Jews was affirmed in the way creation accounts were written in the context of the Babylonian exile. Another distinction that we can find in Genesis creation accounts is the importance of the Sabbath and the seasons that are linked with religious celebrations. Wenham shares that fixed times and the Sabbath may be construed as hints of the editor's preoccupation with the cult.⁵¹ The two verses (Genesis 2:2-3) dedicated to the description and justification of the Sabbath demonstrates the significance of this commandment for the Hebrew people since the origins.

The identity of Israel was affirmed in the process of redaction of the creation accounts as a form of consolidation of the traditions of ancient Israel to the new generations of Jews growing

⁴⁹ William H. Willimon, ed. *Creation: The Apple of God's Eye. Belief Matters*, by Justo González. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015), 9.

⁵⁰ Metzger, Bruce M., Hubbard, David A, Barker, Glenn W., *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, *World Biblical Commentary* by Gordon John Wenham (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 21. Ebook.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 35.

in exile. Puerto Rican traditions have also been reaffirmed in religious and cultural aspects because of colonialism. The resistance that the Hebrew people showed in the precarious historical times of the Babylonian exile contribute to form the Hebrew Bible in the literary forms as we know it. Puerto Ricans that live on the island, just as the ones that live on the mainland of the United States, are in constant struggle for maintaining, as the Jews in the exile (but not identical), their identity as a people. This parallelism observed in the redaction of the Bible as cultural resistance can inspire others like Puerto Ricans in the rejection of the assimilation process from the empire that had colonized the land of the ancestors. The Hebrew people, just as the Puerto Rican people, had demonstrated a profound sense of struggling for the dignity and identity that form their people. The creation accounts of the Bible in Genesis set the stage for the theological, historical, and cultural progression not only of the Hebrew people but for Christians and for the human drama that will continue in the world.

Another interpretative key that we can observe in the creation accounts as part of the redemptive works of God is the role of the responsibility that God assigned to humans. In Genesis 1:2-3 and 2:4-25, God, the creator, enhances the condition of humans above the rest of creation with the purpose of reflecting God's image in the world. The particular approach in Genesis 1:26-30 is a matter of the role that God assigned to humans, Woman and Men in the sacerdotal source of this chapter one. The image of God in humans (women and men) must reflect the loving God that cares for the wellbeing of creation. Humans are in charge to maintain, preserve, and seek the wellbeing God intends for all nature. Genesis 2:8 and 15 in the Yahwistic source tradition appeals to the responsibility of men and the work God had delegated to him. George W. Coats, a biblical scholar, states that:

Adam has positive responsibility for the Garden. That responsibility is signaled by two imperfect verbs in construct: “God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden.” The extension contrasts with the briefer notice in v. 8b. But also, two infinitives construct define his responsibility: “to till it [*leobdāh*] and to keep it [*ûlēšomrāh*].” The Garden requires that this work be responsibly defended so that the order it represents may be preserved.⁵²

God includes the human being as a collaborator in the preservation of the magnificent works that God has created. As a matter of great responsibility Coats points toward a defense of nature to preserve not only its proper function but its beauty. Humans failed God in the basic instructions that Adam received in the Garden of Eden and this disobedience has affected not only human species but all creation. In Genesis 3 the fall of humankind from the primeval relationship with God caused harm and altered the harmonic equilibrium achieved in the Garden of Eden. The consequences of the man’s disobedience to God has reached us in different ways but is most palpable in the consequences of climate change in the whole world and in the sixth mass extinction that is occurring in our times. Human sin could produce the first climate change with the flood story in Genesis. The flood was a new opportunity to humankind that failed again, but the covenant that God made with creation after the flood is remembered in the rainbow as a sign of hope for the future and the fidelity of God in spite of human failure (Genesis 9).

Christian communities that struggle for ecojustice have assumed the responsibility God gave to humankind as it is established in the creation accounts of the Hebrew Bible. What moves the ecojustice leaders of the ecostories presented in this project is the ecotheological interpretations of the biblical accounts of creation in a rereading for their contexts. The important responsibility of caring for the earth has been assumed by many women and men that have

⁵² George Coats, *Genesis with and Introduction to Narrative Literature*, Volume I *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* Rolf Knierim and Gene M. Tucker, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 52.

incarnate the living Word of God in their realities. The text has produced new meanings to address their ecojustice challenges by rereading.

The primeval events in Genesis 1-11 link the stories of the beginnings of creation with the origins of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Hebrew people. These creation accounts in Genesis give a normative through all the Bible and the Jew and Christian traditions for caring and being responsible for the entire Planet Earth. Theology of creation exists from the process of the oral and written stories of the Bible and continues in the promises of new creation that the Bible encompasses for the future.

The Contributions of Two Theologians

Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff provide us with a variety of epistemological clues to rethink our conceptions of the emerging field of ecotheology. Their perspectives come from the Southern hemisphere which contrasts with those in the Northern hemisphere. The framework that Gebara and Boff contribute to this investigation is one that complements the understanding of ecojustice, informed by ecotheology and the ecofeminist approaches. Both theologians represent the progressive tradition of the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church, combining feminist theological perspectives (Gebara) and liberation theology (Boff).

Ivone Gebara: An Ecofeminist Approach

Ivone Gebara, a Catholic nun and scholar, contributes to the development of ecofeminism in the Latin American context. Her contribution has been significant for understanding the link between the degradation of the environment and the abuse of women. Her context as a scholar is particularly interesting because she lives in a neighborhood where poor people, especially

women, struggle for survival. Her theology is a contextual one because she invites us to revise our epistemology in the light of the experiences of poor women in their daily lives. In the absence of female role models, Gebara was forced to carve out her own path to become a critical thinker.⁵³ She has written books and articles and has made contributions along with other ecofeminist scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her voice is for all women who lack one.

The richness and relevance of Gebara's reflections invite us to continually think and rethink our realities related to ecotheology and ecojustice. The contextual theology that she proposes embodies the realities of daily lives of the poor, the women, and the ecosystems; these experiences are the ones that become the foundation of her ecofeminist theology.

Ecofeminism

Women and the earth have been linked together and oppressed for centuries. The discriminatory relationship with the power centers of society, governed by the male patriarchal systems, affects women and the earth. The experience continues in our day but with an awareness to the struggles in this discriminatory reality. There have been some advances since the feminist and ecology rights movements of the sixties, which were awakened in the past century. Today, many women and young ladies suffer given a lack of progress in human rights.

The ecological conscience of caring for the earth and abuses of extreme degradation imposed by the systems of production and consumption are in an alarming stage. The

⁵³ Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, "A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology" *Scielo South Africa Journal for the Study of Religion* n.2 vol.26 (2013): 1. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S1011-76012013000100007.

consequences of climate change are affecting more places on earth and in more extreme ways, creating more poverty and oppression, scarcity and displacement for many, especially the poor, women, and animals.

The ability to tie the suffering of women and the earth can be felt through the groaning of the planet. Women work day-by-day to provide a secure space for their families. The reflection on the suffering from women and earth can open, not only understandings but also strategies for the creation of new models of relationships that can be more equal, with dignity and justice for all. Gebara's ecofeminism seeks to understand individual persons. It understands individuals who are connected to other individuals, who exist together in all aspects and contexts of our shared life. We are all responsible together for living in a more humane way as citizens of a shared and interdependent planet.⁵⁴ The interrelation includes all lives and the spiritual aspect of life. Religion has an important role in our human societies. Gebara states that ecofeminism opens the doors to a new understanding of the role of religion in human life.⁵⁵ This understanding is one that can promote a more unbiased and compassionate approach for those who suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. She argues that the ecofeminist perspective assumes the same convictions introducing the option for women, nature, ecosystems, and also for the earth, our ground and our body.⁵⁶ Her ecofeminism compares the concept of the body of the earth with the bodies of women. Just like the planet has been mistreated for centuries by men, women and their bodies have also been mistreated by men. Her ecofeminism constantly invites

⁵⁴ Ivone Gebara, "The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from Ecofeminist Philosopher Under Siege," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 11, No. 2, Rhetorics, Rituals and Conflicts over Women's Reproductive Power (Fall, 1995): 133.

⁵⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and* 129.

⁵⁶ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para Repensar el Conocimiento y la Religión*, 143.

us to review the knowledge that we have acquired in the light of the tough realities that we are dealing with in our planet today. This invitation is a valuable one because the constant approach is to accept the circumstances the way they are and maintain the status quo, but we know that this attitude will not result in a better world for us or for future generations. We need to review our knowledge in all aspects of our lives.

Epistemology in Constant Revision

Our knowledge with each other brings us to the reflection of our relationships with the earth. Reshaping the androcentric understanding of earth and women is not an easy task. Moving from an instrumental view of reality toward a more conciliatory and cooperative approach is a necessary initial step. Gebara states that individuals must create meaning and reaffirm the values that allow us to live dignified lives.⁵⁷ The communities affected by environmental problems deserve a dignified ecosystem, not one affected by the contamination generated by industries that surround our neighborhoods in a disadvantage way. She shares that ecofeminist epistemology is contextual epistemology because it seeks to take the context of every human group as its primary and most basic point of reference.⁵⁸ Environmental degradation not only affects the communities in their physical health but also in the emotional and spiritual aspects of life. The injustices that affect the communities are often endured by many, in most cases, for a long time.

Environmental struggles for ecojustice unveil many painful scars caused by injustices. Gebara states that inclusive epistemology speaks of the reciprocal interdependence in which we live and exists. If at some point we emphasize one aspect of knowing, we should be aware that

⁵⁷Ibid, 120.

⁵⁸ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminist and Liberation*, 61.

this emphasis is methodological and arises due to the impossibility of devising an all-embracing discourse.⁵⁹ This means that we ought to review our epistemology as a holistic, effective, ecological, and inclusive process. The reflection of our knowledge must be in an integral form to capture the aspects that are guiding our behaviors to harmful actions for ourselves as well as for nature. Gebara reminds us that our knowing of God has repercussions in our daily behaviors.⁶⁰ The idea of God that we have is the one that will guide our lives. How can we understand God? How can the understanding of the church of the Sacred One bring justice and a nurturing love that enlivens all creation?

Detheologizing

Ivone Gebara goes beyond the theology of liberation. She is concerned with the oppression underlying knowledge production within an androcentric cosmovision, not only regarding women but also for the sacred body of the earth. Her ecofeminism guides us in a process of detheologizing as an invitation to examine our understanding and meaning of theology. Gebara assures that liberation theology did not significantly change what could be identified as the traditional masculinization of the religious experience; she shares that ecofeminist theology goes beyond affirming the needs of the poor and introduces a new problematic which does not necessarily need to be viewed as a split from liberation theology.⁶¹ The consideration of the knowledge that women have in theological circles has been restricted and rejected for centuries. Detheologizing involves examining ideas or images of God as male or female. Gebara goes

⁵⁹ Ibid, 64.

⁶⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, 139.

⁶¹ Ivone Gebara. *Women and Liberation Theology* (Berlin Iss 12, Lola Press (Apr 30, 2000), 2.

beyond to affirm that breaking with the patriarchal image of God dominating or conquering nature is a necessary step.⁶² The image of the patriarchal God has been used to validate the male dominating oppression systems over women and over the earth. Her proposal includes a criticism of the patriarchal structures of theology, structures that stem from their own Christian traditions in which masculine domination is a constant. She introduces a problem that includes a different anthropological vision. For this reason, feminist theology is also critical of liberation theology without distancing itself from its social-ethical perspective.⁶³ Detheologizing also includes being critical of our own religious postures and reflecting about our image of God that guides our actions on behalf of life on earth. Gebara promotes a new theological task, a new dialogue, and a symbolic construction that is antipatriarchal.⁶⁴ For this reflection process to be effective, it needs to have the courage to bring humility to accept changes and options for life.

Reconstructionist Perspectives

The contextual theology reflected in Gebara's ecofeminism will bring profound reconstructionist perspective to this analysis. She states that we speak of reconstruction when a human relationship, a piece of land, a city, or even a society needs to remake itself, recreate itself, and renew its relational life.⁶⁵ This reconstructionist approach allows for a revision of our knowledge

⁶² Ivone Gebara. *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, 135.

⁶³ Ivone Gebara, *Women and Liberation Theology*, 2.

⁶⁴ María Vanessa, Zamora González, "La Contribución de Ivone Gebara a la Teología del siglo XXI en América Latina," (*Contribution of Ivone Gebara to Latin America theology in XXI century*) (Revista ESPIGA Año XIII, N.o 27: 1-8, January-June 2014), 7.

⁶⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 16.

of the anthropocentric patterns in our society that have degraded the planet. Many communities in Puerto Rico and across the earth have experienced degraded soils, rivers, forests, and entire ecosystems. She affirms that we are constantly faced with new problems that demand the attention of the church.⁶⁶ The church is part of the bioregion of each community, and, as part of it, it has responsibilities, relationships, and implications in the wellbeing of the community. The churches can rethink what it means to take care of their neighbors in the twenty-first century. Gebara discloses that the ecofeminist perspective claims an ethic not only rooted, in loving the neighbor but also one in loving the earth, our common home. This ethic includes care for the human beings as well as the entire ecosystem that we do not recognize all the time.⁶⁷ The ethical relationship between Christians and the earth must be reviewed considering the reclaims for justice and love in the Bible that cares and preserves what has been given as a responsibility. She upholds that relearning the proximity between us, relearning the sharing of gifts and goods, and relearning to listen to ourselves and feel ourselves are the foundation for building quality relationships between us and the entirety of our planet.⁶⁸ Thus, the reconstructionist approach includes a serious reflection of ourselves, God, and nature.

Gebara maintains that to love the present time means caring for the earth and not our ongoing destruction of fellow humans. It is not a call to weapons but rather a call to collective educational effort of waking up to new possibilities of collective experience, to extraordinary new perceptions in our immanence, and to cherishing the efforts of every person in the task of

⁶⁶ Ivone Gebara, "A Reform that Includes Eco-Justice," *A Journal of Theology*, 117.

⁶⁷ Ivone Gebara. *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, 139.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 121.

creating a world we can live in.⁶⁹ The church can make a contribution based on the real experiences of the congregations, which are immersed in caring for their communities and their bioregions. New understandings of how to deal with these kinds of problems can emerge from the experiences in helping communities with environmental problems. This investigation aims to share findings based on the knowledge earned from the roots of the church. The experiences that each congregation will bring in their work with ecojustice within their communities can be a matrix of new understandings. There is an emerging need to rebuild meanings that can guide us in rebuilding communities, ecosystems, and the community of life. We need to consider the ecofeminist approach of relatedness to recover this important sense of rebuilding. The efforts that congregations and communities together forge to rebuild and restore creation are born from the loving connections which we can nurture between each other, God, and nature.

Ethical Relatedness

Ethical relatedness is the foundation of healthy relationships for it establishes the attention and care that we ought to have towards others. We are connected in the interwoven life by our relationships with one another, the earth, and the God that transcends us. Gebara shares this work in the educational collaborative learning process by helping to provide a foundation for learning from each other's experiences. Relatedness is a key term in her understanding of life. She discloses that ethical relatedness requires a whole educational process aimed at rebuilding our self-understanding. This educational process is slow and constant and will be necessary in all social institutions and religious creeds.⁷⁰ When we as a church do not pay attention to the

⁶⁹ Ivone Gebara, "A Reform that Includes Eco-Justice," *A Journal of Theology*, 121.

⁷⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 90.

problems that affect our community, we are accomplices of the oppressive systems that are destroying the sacred body of the earth. Her theology, including her ecofeminist approaches, provides expectations of identifying new possibilities to find how we as a church can contribute to the healing and caring of our bioregion.

The congregations that will participate in this investigation have witnessed ecological injustices in their communities. Gebara articulates that ecological injustice is fed by a failure to see how closely our home life is connected to all life on the planet.⁷¹ Understanding the connections and interdependence of life on our planet is key to elevate our concern with the devastation that is happening to our earth. We have deeply failed in taking care of earth, as she describes it, and that failure is embedded in governmental decisions, the lack of interest in the nonhuman life, the mistreatment received by the most vulnerable like the poor, women, children, and in the environmental contamination that affects many communities. The urgency to bring justice to the most vulnerable and to the ecosystem that has been affected emerges when we can understand our connections on behalf of the other with all that God has created.

Ethical relatedness develops awareness of the existence of the other person who is part of my life and who also belongs to the interwoven life. The study of relations between living and nonliving nature is the basis for the ecological concept. Gebara emphasizes that relatedness opens the way for an interdependent justice, an ecojustice—that is, justice that includes the ecosystem. Relatedness sets forth a search for balance in daily life as well as in the institutions we establish. It shows us that sins committed by women are linked with the excesses men incur

⁷¹ Ivone Gebara, *Yearning for Beauty. The Other Side* (July & August 2003), 24.

in and that the sins of men are linked with what women lack.⁷² The church is an institution in the community that can promote new understandings to cope with new environmental problems that our communities face nowadays. Congregations in alliance with other community groups can strengthen the resilience of the community where they are located based on ethical relatedness.

Theology of Hope

Hope at the heart of complex and long-term environmental problems is not only a necessity but a challenge to be preserved by the church and community leaders. Many communities lost hope in the continuous degradation and the impotence that they felt against the corporate giants of capitalism. We have heard of the sad and unfair realities that people had to go through where there was no hope in these kinds of problems. Gebara states that: “God is our hope because we want to go beyond the terror, the violence, and fear that crushes us. God is our hope because we often have no visible hope, because often the haze of fear that envelopes us and all things seems terrifying. God is our hope as the ultimate cry for justice: a “no” to unjust killing, to arms and armies, and a “yes” to a dignified life.”⁷³ Hope emerges from the unknown possibilities in which we can find God. Gebara says that God is always our hope, because hope comes when you do not expect it.⁷⁴ The presence of God in our suffering brings hope. She states that theological reflection must adopt a phenomenological process; that is, it must be founded on personal and collective historical experience, even if it is always open to a hope beyond all hope.⁷⁵ When a

⁷² Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, TN: Fortress Press, 2002), 1739 and 1747. Kindle.

⁷³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 135.

⁷⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, 147.

⁷⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, 1465. Kindle.

congregation is present in the sufferings and trials of their community and walk by their side accompanying them, they are saying to those who suffer: you are not alone. God is with us in ways that we cannot express but the feeling of communion in solidarity brings hope over hope.

Theology of hope in Gebara's reflections is possible in the figure of Jesus, the one that incarnates and comes to live within us.⁷⁶ Gebara says that the way of Jesus, the way of foolish love, a way that is far from logic of the established powers, was the way of affirming the struggle for life, and specially for the life of the oppressed, a way of resurrection, and the only way that gives us the right to affirm that God is our hope.⁷⁷ Jesus is the one who knows what suffering, abandonment, and persecution for justice implies; He can understand us in the ecojustice struggles for the wellbeing of creation. In other words, Gebara affirms that, from a theological perspective, the fundamental changes in anthropology, philosophy, natural sciences, astrophysics, and cosmology beginning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have opened up new paths for reinterpreting the concept of God.⁷⁸ The essence of being part of the sacred body of the earth and how Jesus reframes, rethinks, and creates new understandings about the salvation of the world and creation is an active invitation for doing theology with Gebara's ecofeminism perspective.

How can ecotheology help in drawing upon ecojustice actions to produce hope among communities affected by contamination? How can the stories of hope in the four churches that have struggled with ecojustice issues bring hope to other churches in similar situations? Fritsch

⁷⁶ Gebara's use of Jesus is a harmonized one. She does not specify the Gospel she is drawing from but rather harmonizes the Gospels to construct a Jesus.

⁷⁷ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 135.

⁷⁸ Ivone Gebara, "A Reform that Includes Eco Justice," 1.

establishes that “suffering can be seen through hope-filled glasses. A spiritual power transcends physical and political powerlessness. God gives us a new heart (Ezek. 36:27), a new spirit, a new way of acting.”⁷⁹ Ecojustice issues are not easy to resolve, but congregations and communities need to address them for the sake of the community and all creation.

Leonardo Boff: A Life for the Ecoliberation Theology

Leonardo Boff has done extensive work in Latin American liberation theology and ecotheology. Ordained into the priesthood in 1964, he was later expelled from the priesthood due to his ideas on liberation theology. He remains in the Catholic Church as a lay person.⁸⁰ He developed a fruitful theological legacy in teaching at the postgraduate level, offering lectures around the world, and producing extensive work as a scholar. “Boff has continue to write and that many of his post-1990 publications address new areas of the relationship between Christianity and ecology.”⁸¹ The ecotheology of Leonardo Boff can help us gain an in-depth understanding of ecojustice from the perspective of liberation theology.

The main concern for Boff is the exclusion of the poor and the conditions that provoke harm to the most vulnerable, including the earth itself. Liberation theology allows Boff to identify the structures of oppression that affect the poor and the earth. He states, critically, that all things are governed by an instrumental and mechanical vision: people, animals, plants, and minerals. All creatures, in short, lose their relative autonomy and their intrinsic value. They are reduced to the level of mere means to an end, with human beings seen as the rulers of the

⁷⁹ Albert Fritsh S.J., and Angela Iadavaia-Cox, *Eco-Church: An Action Manual* (San José, California: Resource Publications, Inc.1992), 83.

⁸⁰ Leonardo Boff, *EcuRed*, accessed July 25, 2019, www.ecured.cu/Leonardo_Boff.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

universe and at the center of all interests and are free to decide.⁸² Another concern is how we as church deal with this anthropocentric, instrumental, and mechanistic vision that promotes the wellbeing of a few privileged people over the clear majority of poor people. Boff says that the role of theology is not simply that of unmasking how faith is being perverted but of developing in a positive sense, or recovering, the true countenance of the God of Life and the genuine message of Jesus, which liberates from all oppression.⁸³ The Liberation Theology of Boff seeks ways to connect the misery of humanity and nature with a theology of hope to restore and recover the dignity of the earth. His thoughts include a profound reflection in ecospirituality and a holistic appreciation of Creation theology.

Liberation Theology and How Connected We Are to the Needs of Our Community

The God that intervenes in history, liberates His people from oppressed realities, provides freedom and new possibilities, is also the One that can guide us today in new processes of liberating the earth from peril. Boff says that liberation theology lives by its original insight: the discovering of the intimate relationship between the God of life, the poor, and liberation. On this basis, it is an established spirituality, a pastoral practice, and a theology. It is beneficial for the poor and for all the churches.⁸⁴ The pastoral care that the church can bring for the weary communities, dealing sometimes for many years with environmental problems, is a necessity that is increasing all over the world with the disadvantages that many communities endure because of

⁸² Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 342. Kindle.

⁸³ Leonardo Boff, *The Path of Hope: Fragments from a Theologian's Journey* (Maryknoll, New York, 1993), 102.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 1664.

their race, low economical income, and lack for opportunities to achieve a formal education. Boff establishes in this context that we must consider it important for the religious people to insert themselves into the popular milieus of the oppressed and poor, of shouldering the people's burdens, of sharing their deprivations and communicating in their yearnings.⁸⁵ This invitation for a liberation theology that follows Jesus' path with the oppressed people and land can give insights into the exercise of a practical theology that integrates the care for humanity and for all beings who encompass the ecosystem.

The disintegrated vision of reality has drawn us to the fragmentation that we experience in our social relationship with nature. When we see ourselves as disentangled from the nonhuman creation, the results of this kind of segregation produces a lack of understanding and sensibility toward the land, the water, and the animals. As we see ourselves separated from the rest of creation, the possibility for building more just relationships vanishes in the selfish conceptions that have driven us to the actual global environmental crisis. Boff states that liberation theology sees science, technology, and power as part of the program redemption, construction, consolidation, and expansion of human life and freedom, beginning with those who have the least life and freedom.⁸⁶ The holistic approach of being inclusive produces a more coherent response for those complex problems and can produce a more integrated approach toward attending to ecojustice issues. The inclusion of those who have the least life and freedom, as he describes them as an active and starting part of the solution, is an important contribution that reminds us of the Paulo Freire statement that the oppressed can be an active subject in their

⁸⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence* (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 183.

⁸⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 1797.

own liberation process.⁸⁷ The Christian churches can support the liberation movements of the poor that hold the subjects of their liberation in the shape of the poor themselves.⁸⁸ The ones who have the least life and freedom are the ones who can guide us in more resilient strategies for addressing hard and challenging processes because searching for new possibilities is part of their survival on a daily basis.

The strategies that liberation theology suggests calls to begin with the empowerment of the ones who suffer, the poor. The church must take sides with those who are at the limits of their circumstances to bring hope and a presence that can make a significant difference. Boff states that liberation theology represents the mind of the parts of the church that has adopted the people's struggle so that they can make sure that society changes enough to satisfy fundamental needs and allow the exercise of basic human rights.⁸⁹ Basic rights are in jeopardy these days; more often we see the violation of fundamental human rights all over the world. As the Body of Christ, we must work for the changes that provide the basic rights of our human family. Boff says that this powerful spirituality sees a service performed for our sisters and brothers as a service to Christ Himself.⁹⁰ Jesus situates Himself in the place of the poor, in the face of the forgotten, in the illness of the child, in the ones who need our help, love, and compassion.

The ecostories of hope of four congregations, the subject of this project, have dealt with or are dealing with ecojustice problems in their communities and can share the insights and

⁸⁷ Kim Díaz, *Paulo Freire (1921-1997)*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource, <https://iep.utm.edu/freire/>.

⁸⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 977.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 1696.

⁹⁰ Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 65.

learnings with the Toa Alta congregation in a process of collaborative learning in their localities. Boff suggests in this approach that this care for the ecological locality will only become real if there is a collective process of education, in which the majority takes part, has access to information, and engages in an exchange of knowledge.⁹¹ The exchange of wisdom, hardships, and learnings from the four churches that have been involved in ecojustice challenges in their communities can bring a collaborative path of education between churches and the church in Toa Alta. We need to insert a variety of religious, scientific, and social factors that enable us to integrate these disciplines in our understandings of ecological challenges and also propose real alternatives that flow from the people's experience and collaboration. Boff affirms that the poor practice a systematic consciousness-raising regarding their right and dignity. Then they try to live, right in their own communities, a new alternative ethos of more solidarity and participation in the spirit of the beatitudes.⁹² The church must contemplate the ecojustice issues in a holistic approach to bring real possibilities and hope for these kinds of problems in our times. Even when other powerful factors wish to stop the communitarian and ecclesiological efforts, the Body of Christ must stand firm in its core ethical values of love and justice. Boff adds that the church can be persecuted and misunderstood by the powerful men/women of this world but must not be allowed to be forgotten by the poor.⁹³ The church following Jesus' path and His ethic of care and love can be with the ones who struggle for their liberation.

⁹¹ Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 96.

⁹² Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 203.

⁹³ Leonardo Boff, *Ecología: Grito de la Tierra, Grito de los Pobres* (Ecology: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor) (Madrid, España: Editorial Trotta, 2002), 211.

The struggle for liberation in ecojustice issues transcends our human family and penetrates all the living and nonliving creatures, the whole universe. Romans 8:21 suggests that God will redeem all creation. Boff tells us that the more a person suffers with the degradation of the environment, the more he or she becomes indignant about the sufferings of animals and revolts against the destruction of the green land of the earth and will develop new attitudes of compassion, of tenderness, of protection towards nature, and a cosmic spirituality.⁹⁴ These attitudes are the ones we desperately need today, attitudes toward the well-being of the whole ecosystem, bioregion, and the whole creation. We need to develop an ethic that Boff describes as the planetary ethic of care and justice.

Planetary Ethic of Care and Justice

The ethical concern for the wellbeing of our common home—the earth—resonates with the responsibilities that we must assume for our brothers and sisters and for all creatures. Boff discloses that we must promote solidarity with all living beings, starting with the least favored; a passionate valuation of life in all its forms; participation as a response to the appeals of all human beings and to the thrust of the universe; and respect for nature, for which we are responsible.⁹⁵ This ethical responsibility must guide us in the actions and attitudes we have to assume concerning climate change and the deprivation of biodiversity because of the harm we as humans have done to the earth. Boff maintains that as we learn more about contemporary cosmology, we discover that the planet is a vast complex organism. When we are part of that

⁹⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*, 80.

⁹⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 532.

organism and it is violated, we suffer too.⁹⁶ We need to rescue the wisdom of the relatedness that individualism tried to relegate and abolish. Boff states that violence and aggression in the environment grow from roots deep down in the mental structures that have their genealogy and ancestry within us.⁹⁷ These sinful structures operate through economic, political, and social institutions.

Boff gives us an important clue when he refers to the mental structures that perpetuate the environmental crisis produced by the human species. We need an ethical approach that integrates all creation and that wants the wellbeing and the fair equilibrium for sustaining life on earth. He articulates that there is a human and social right, but that there is also an ecological and cosmic right. We do not have the right to what we have not created.”⁹⁸ God includes all creation in the call for Sabbath rest, for it will lead to the renovation and carrying capacity of the ecosystem.

The decision-making process in our world concerning industrial development is depriving all of us from a sustainable future for present and future generations. Boff states that we ought to develop an ethical project about international solidarity and must promote and protect life so as to restrict the harm done by science and technology and to guarantee the survival of creation. The new ethical order is not anthropocentric but economic, striving as it does to bring about the equilibrium of the entire cosmic community.⁹⁹ The approach needs to be local and global, from the locations to the planetary system, from the human mind to fair relationships with creation. Religion has made claims to capture the attention of the

⁹⁶ Ibid, 60.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 455.

⁹⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*. Ecology and Justice Series, 421.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 1878.

environmental situation of the planet; Pope Francis has made an official encyclical: *Laudato Si* regarding the urgency of changing our path to rescue our common home, the earth. The main leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartolomei, has called for action and responsibility in the environmental crisis of the twenty-first century. The religious approach calls for a behavior guided by the ethical principles of loving the neighbor as we love ourselves. Boff understands that religion would help science to act in an ethical fashion, in the service of life and not in the service of market forces.¹⁰⁰ The ethical imperative from Christianity calls for a holistic interrelatedness of care and love for all the present and future generations of all species.

Boff's Ecclesiology Ethical and Ecojustice Perspectives

The church has a mission and that mission entails sharing the gospel that can redeem the human being and all creation. Boff says that the gospel message includes a reclaiming of justice in this world. This is the reason why the church has the right and the responsibility to proclaim justice in the social arena, nationally and internationally, and denounce injustice.¹⁰¹ Proclaiming the gospel includes being aware of ecojustice issues in the community that surround the church and assuming a role for accompanying the people who are suffering because of the environmental problem. Boff describes the church in this way: “Assuming justice for the poor, the church is assuming the purest following of Jesus.”¹⁰² The mission of the church includes giving pastoral

¹⁰⁰ Leonardo Boff, *Toward an Eco-Spirituality*. A Series Church at the Crossroads (Chestnut Ridge, New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2015), 24.

¹⁰¹ Leonardo Boff, *Iglesia, Carisma y Poder: Ensayos de Ecclesiología Militante (Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church)* (Santander, España: Editorial Sal Terrae 1982), 50.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 47.

care and support to those who are suffering the consequences of negligent and greedy decisions that harm health and environment.

The ecostories in this project aim to reveal the struggles, trials, sadness, joys, and hopes that these four congregations experienced at the heart of ecojustice issues. Justice for Christian congregations must not be a choice but a fulfillment of God's will for the church and the community. Boff states that justice is so important that, without it, the kingdom of God will not come.¹⁰³ Proclaiming the gospel in these days always implies doing justice for the wellbeing of the community and creation. Hence, Boff says that we can rightly speak of an ecological justice, that is, of a just relationship with beings in creation for they are all around us, and in some sense, they are also citizens."¹⁰⁴ He includes other beings that are nonhuman as citizens of the earth. Animals and plants were citizens of earth before the human species appeared on earth; the Bible's story of creation and the evolution theory agree on this issue. The nonhuman creation deserves respect, care, and recognition of its value in actions for justice from congregations that can share the love of God for the entire creation. Boff presents it as an invitation for liberation by practicing justice:

As Christians pursue liberation from immense social evil, they must develop alongside the perennially valid personal virtues of a political holiness: to love amid class conflicts, to hope for fruits that will come only in the far distant future, to stand in solidarity with oppressed groups, to ascetically submit to decisions taken in community and finally, to be ready to give their own life in faithfulness to the gospel and to their oppressed brothers and sisters.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Leonardo Boff, *Iglesia, Carisma y Poder: Ensayos de Eclesiología Militante*, 52.

¹⁰⁴ Leonardo Boff, *The Path of Hope: Fragments from a Theologian's Journey*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

Obedying God and the command to do what is moral and correct on behalf of the ones who suffer more and of the biodiversity of our planet is part of practicing an ecological ecclesiology for the world today. We, as Christians, will need more than ever to review our commitments with the word of God and His good creation which have been mistreated by a lack of an ethical and justice perspective in times of climate change and ecological distress.

Ways to Connect Human and Nature Misery with the Theology of Hope to Restore and Recover the Earth

Hope is a necessity of Christianity. Hope is not a naive dream about the future; instead, it is a reality that transcends our difficult circumstances and has the capacity to transform and equip us for the struggles of life. Boff, in that sense, shares that religious people who make it an option for their own internal liberation and that of their sisters and brothers must be armed with the living experience of a great hope, a hope that goes beyond all visible limits of our history.¹⁰⁶ Hope in this sense can be found even in the most difficult situations. The eco-stories encompass four congregations which decided to act in hope and to keep going in their struggles because their hope and strength come from God, Creator of heavens and earth. Boff affirms that, in the suffering of the poor and the marginalized, a Christian perceives the presence and enactment in the flesh and the reverberates in the cries of his or her brothers and sisters.¹⁰⁷ This difficult place is the place for hope. The groan of creation is a groan toward hope and toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. Boff affirms that hope is the future that is already present, tasted, and experienced but not yet received and fully realized.¹⁰⁸ The Kingdom of God that was initiated

¹⁰⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 184.

¹⁰⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 2067.

¹⁰⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 24.

with the ministry of Jesus and has been extended to the mission of the church until that reign comes and includes all creation. Hope is not only in the future but also is present today in our difficulties and trials; there is hope amid human errors. Hope is an essential ingredient to all ecojustice issues that the community and the church has to strive toward.

Meanwhile, the work for justice can create new approaches to address environmental distress that affects the health of the communities and holds a capacity to support them. Boff explains hope saying that religion is grounded in a hope that is also the love of what does not exist, and faith in what has not existed, as well as faith in what has not yet been experienced, as the letter to the Hebrews rightly says: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).¹⁰⁹ Environmental problems and the efforts of the church and the community need hope. Hope is what the people stand for, what is needed when complications are part of processes so we can stick together and trust that our work for the wellbeing of creation will bear fruits and many other positive outcomes.

When congregations act in hope and love, many transformations can occur both at a personal and at a community level. Boff states that up to that point, the Christian churches can support the liberation movements of the poor, who have an active role in their liberation process.¹¹⁰ Boff confronts us as members of Christian congregations so we can assume our responsibility in caring and hoping for the earth so it may be restored. Hope is the movement towards being a part of the healing and a good outcome for acting on time and with justice. Gebara and Boff challenge our status quo and our theologically safe zones, confronting the hard realities in our

¹⁰⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 848.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 977.

environmental degraded communities. Leadership to guide congregations in this maze needs to contemplate all the factors that intersect in ecojustice problems in a holistic fashion.

Contextual Theology Examination of the Economic Distress, Colonialism, Race and Gender Collision

Puerto Rico faces multiple challenges in the vulnerable communities. The economic, race, and gender collisions have been under colonialism for more than 500 hundred years. When first colonized by Spain for 405 years and the last 123 years under the domain of the United States, Puerto Rico lost political freedom a long time ago. Around the world, people talk about post colonialism, decolonialism, and colonialism given that Puerto Rico is still a colony, a territory belonging to the United States of America. Even when we have a government elected by the people, we do not have final word in our business, decisions, and plans for the wellbeing of our people. Puerto Rican people suffer under domination; this suffering is latent in the economical, race, and environmental injustices that we endure as people. The decolonial approach can help us to better engage critically with our embedded cultural and political Eurocentric/American system as it is explained by Cuban Reineiro Arce, Profesor of Theology, in his article: “Towards a Decolonial Approach in Latin America”.¹¹¹ Puerto Rico continues in a colonial mode, with all that encompasses the hard reality of colonialism. An invitation to a decolonial thinking is an invitation to discover and rediscover the silenced voices that have emerged before and are emerging today. A land that does not belong to us in political and legal terms is a land that is who we are: it is part of our veins, our bodies, and our sacred history of a mixed racial people in the Caribbean. The decolonization concept resonates in our senses about the colonization of the

¹¹¹ Reinerio Arce-Valentín, “Toward a Decolonial Approach in Latin American Theology,” *Theology Today*, (74 (1) 41-48, Oaks, California: Sage Publications 2017), 42.

human being over nature, forbidding the natural balance to endure and continue. The great devastation of *Homo Sapiens* continued in every single place that has been conquered by men is evidence of patriarchy. Gebara says that the ideal suffering of the patriarchal world is not only androcentric but also anthropocentric; it minimizes not only the suffering of women but also the violence inflicted on animals and plants and the ecosystem in general.¹¹² Because everything is related, the pain inflicted in our environment due to contamination irremediably impacts human lives.

Racism inside Puerto Rican culture is present but not on a scale that separates or segregates us in a clear way. The regions on the island where you typically encounter more African American descendants are those on the coastline of the island, whereas in the interior mountain areas you will find the fairest skin people. The neighborhoods that suffer environmental problems are the ones that are near the coast and not in the interior mountain area. Many industries have polluted important and ecological sensitive sites for years, creating health hazards, economic devaluation of homes, and violent problems in the communities affected by these problems. A hard reality, like this one, continues the cycle of poverty and the lack of opportunities for the next generations in these communities. To overcome these hardships some communities have organized the fight against these realities, yet others have not due to the complexity and lack of resources.

The community that surrounds the landfill in Toa Alta is a low income one and has endured this contamination for more than 40 years. Gebara shares that her ecofeminist perspective introduces a dimension that does not only include women, but also all the vital

¹¹² Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, 1338. Kindle.

elements and the attention to the ecosystem. This inclusion of women and the ecosystem is a broad sense of community to overcome the dualistic hierarchical forms of alienation.¹¹³ The contamination of plants, animals, and river of the bioregion have affected the health of people for a long time in Toa Alta. The awareness of recognizing the holistic approach that ecofeminism contributes to this reflection can open new understandings in the struggles of the communities and in our presence as Christian congregations.

Environmental problems affect not only the most vulnerable but also an entire community. The ecofeminist perspective introduces the option for women and nature, for our ecosystem. Also, it reveals the limits of a particular social class and it includes genre, ethnic, and racial conflicts.¹¹⁴ All these conflicts are present in the Toa Alta Landfill environmental problem. The women are the ones who take care of the sick members of their family, especially respiratory problems like asthma due to the hazardous odors. Women are exposed to harmful conditions due to their time at home. Social class and the lack of access to formal education creates the conditions to keep the population trying to cope for survival and not envisioning, in most cases, opportunities to address the environmental problems that are affecting their lives. Gebara states that well-kept neighborhoods, clean streets, and good water are essential for a healthy life.¹¹⁵ Everyone deserves living conditions that promote a healthy lifestyle. Everyone who searches for ecojustice needs hope to forge new insights that uncover new possibilities for addressing the environmental challenges in our communities and countries.

¹¹³ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para repensar el conocimiento y la religión*, 142.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 143.

¹¹⁵ Ivone Gebara, "Yearning for Beauty," *The Other Side* (July & August. 2003), 25.

Biblical Representations

The Bible is grounded in spiritual, theological, historical, social, economic, emotional, and physical experiences between human beings, creation, and the Creator. Hence, the Bible encompasses all aspects of life. Boff states that the Christian Scriptures are intended to recover and not to replace the revelation of creation.¹¹⁶ Two theological principles are work for Boff. First, God revealed Godself through nature, uniting the physical and spiritual way of being. Second, this revelation evolves from nature and is expressed through the Scriptures as we have it today. Informed by these principles, a closer look at various texts from the Scriptures can direct us toward a profound ecological responsibility. Such readings do assume certain theological assumptions such as the manifestation of God is witnessed throughout the biblical books and that theology is one that emanates from the faithful representation of different people throughout the Scriptures. What then follows is a reading and a new consideration from a “green” perspective, highlighting aspects toward a theology of creation.

A Call for Ecojustice in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible is an ancient text that was written many years ago. This historical distance makes it challenging to understand its socio-historical context in the twenty-first century. Even with this different and distant context from society today, the Hebrew people, as represented in the literary text, developed as communities with an identity, religion, and government with a profound and deep connection to earth and humanity. Such connection deserves more attention and study. Particularly the connection with the agrarian society of Israel and the claims to do

¹¹⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 679.

justice for the land and the poor as it relates to the ecojustice claims in our societies today. The interrelation between earth and humanity is stated in the Hebrew Bible best presented in the first two chapters of Genesis.

Creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 appeal to two basic principles referring to human beings. In Genesis 1:26-27, God creates human beings in God's own image, with the primary responsibility of governing and being responsible for the wellbeing of what God has created. In Genesis 2:15, God creates the human beings on earth and instructs them to take care and cultivate it. This is a principle of care and sustainable relationship between humanity and the earth. The call for justice is represented metaphorically as coming from the Earth in various biblical stories. For instance, another call for justice comes right before the story of the flood: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Gen. 6:11). The lack of justice and righteousness in the world produced a huge "climate" change in the times when Noah lived. As a result, God floods the world. As a gesture of care for both humanity and all of creation God initiates a covenant with humanity. Hope for a new beginning was established on earth, but it did not last long.

Ecological justice is present in surprising ways in some biblical stories. In Deuteronomy 20:19, the text includes regulations concerning war periods. God prohibits cutting down the trees that bear fruit and calls on the attention from people and tells them not to attack the trees as enemies because they cannot defend themselves. The Bible establishes justice for the trees that provide food for all living creatures, so that these trees should not be destroyed or harmed. God does justice, not only for human beings, but also for animals and plants. Many ecosystems are suffering the consequences of pollution—not to mention human beings and all the living creatures present who are suffering too. That is why the term *ecojustice* refers not only to human

beings but also to bioregions, such as the plants, birds, and animals, that encompass the bioregion. The Hebrew Bible contains a rich foundational tradition in which justice is a core of the message. The same can be said of the prophetic tradition.

The claim for justice is very present in the prophetic tradition of Israel. Through the prophets, the earth feels, becomes ill, and reclaims justice because of the exploitation that it has suffered. The law of Yahweh is not followed as it meant to be, and many distortions have been denounced by the prophets. The speech pronounced by Isaiah in chapter 24 is a very descriptive personification of earth through hardships:

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear her guilt. Therefore, earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left. (Isaiah 24:4-6).

As Isaiah states, earth is suffering for the sin of the people and expresses it by mourning. For sure, the ecological principle of relatedness is present in this passage. All is connected and the consequences of sinful actions have repercussions on others and in nature. J. J. M. Roberts says that what is odd about the present passage, however, is that in context of the chapter this breach of covenant is not restricted to Israel but is something in which the whole earth seems to be involved.¹¹⁷ How does our sin contaminate the earth? How does our breaking the covenant with God affect the created order? Nature suffers in a way that resonates not only with the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible but also with the groan of creation in the New Testament as Paul presents it in Romans. The personification of nature in the Hebrew Bible is not something new, instead it is a constant in wisdom literature, in the historical accounts of the people of Israel, and

¹¹⁷ J.J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*. Edited by Machinist Peter. Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2015. Accessed November 4, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctvgs0919), 314.

in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrews. The connection with nature and its personification can be seen in the Hebrew Bible as part of the social imaginary of ancient Israel. The sadness and pain that the earth endures are the direct consequences of human behavior. The absence of justice makes the earth ill. There are more prophets like Isaiah who describes the sin that breaches God's covenant and affects nature as direct consequences bringing curse for humans and nature.

For instance, Amos was a prophet and a farmer; he used images of the land in his message and assumed the voice of the poor against those who committed injustice against them. In Amos 8:4 he says: "Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land." Amos pronounces these words against those who were dishonest and had cheated the poor for more money. "God will never forget," says Amos (8:7 NIV), and God will do justice for the poor. Nowadays, many communities suffer because of the greedy ambitions of those who pollute poor neighborhoods with companies that do not comply with environmental regulations. Robert Ellis shares that the book of Amos reflects an ecology of pain that arises from abuse of the land and its peasants by the wealthy elite of Israel.¹¹⁸ The prophet's claim echoes with the communities that raised their voices in the ecostories of this investigation against the ambitions of those that contaminate their land, water, and air. The scope that Amos brings to his message is one from the perspective of the marginalized people, because he is part of the pastors and peasants of Israel that suffered from the abuse of the rich over the poor. Gebara argues for the importance of seriously considering the theology of those that live their faith in the midst of suffering and injustices. God called Amos to be a prophet from the background of those that experience hard circumstances of life in his time. Also, similar to the context of Amos, but not the same, a good quantity of the food that the lower income families can afford today is

¹¹⁸ Robert Ellis, "Amos Ecology" *Review & Expositor* 112, no. 2 (May 2015): 256.

genetically modified or mixed with agents that contaminate and produce illness in vulnerable populations. Justice is a prevailing theme in the book of Amos. Ellis argues that Amos affirms that in the moral realm, human relationships should be characterized by the following maxim: “Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a never-failing stream” (5:24)”. These relational concepts of righteousness and justice reflect a fundamental loyalty that is part of the moral fabric of God’s good creation.¹¹⁹ The work of the churches for ecojustice in their communities can find biblical and theological support in the traditions for justice of the prophets of Israel. Ecojustice is a necessary reflection and action that derives from the ecotheological reflection of the interdependence that is represented in creation itself.

This holistic inclusion of nature throughout the Hebrew Bible shows an interesting form of appreciation for the participation of nature in our daily lives. In other words, creation perspectives show up in every aspect of the Hebrew Bible, including wisdom literature. Ecotheology communicates, through the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, an important element that invites us to renew our relationship with nature. Proverbs highlights justice in all relationships. Proverbs 31:9 says: “speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” This Proverb has a command not to procrastinate, “Speak up and judge fairly.” The church assumes a role of accompanying the community that suffers ecological injustices. The church that is not silent when facing environmental sin but denounces the injustice works on behalf of justice for its community. Ecojustice is also affirmed in this wisdom literature for humans and animals. God is on the side of nature and not just humans. God, creator of heavens and earth cares about all creation and invites us through the Hebrew Bible to care with the ethics of justice that must prevail in our relationships. Thus, the Hebrew Bible represents through its

¹¹⁹ Robert Ellis, “Amos Ecology” *Review & Expositor* 112, no. 2 (May 2015): 256-68.

narratives a story that foregrounds an ecojustice theme that is found in all parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Theology of Creation in the New Testament

The New Testament includes the subject of creation as part of the redemption plan for salvation in Jesus Christ. The theme of creation is quite visible in the ministry carried out by Jesus, as shown in the Gospels. It is also present in the theological understanding of the early church in the Pauline letters, and, theologically, in the revelation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. Echoes of the communitarian aspect of the Trinity in the participation of Jesus as God and the Spirit in creation can be read in gospel of John and thus deserves a special attention for our ecojustice efforts in our communities. Rereading the gospel, we can find keys for ecojustice and inclusion of nature in the ministry of God for humans and the earth. That inclusion must teach us integral ways to address ecojustice issues that affect the entire living community.

Before taking a look at the gospel of John, the Gospel of Luke emphasizes the ministry with the poor—a dominant theme of justice in this gospel (1:53, 2:7, 3:11, 4:18-19, 6:20, 6:24, 7:22, 14:13, 16:19-31, 18:24, 19:8). Likewise, Mathew 25 presents the mandate of standing by the people in need and providing them with presence, company, food, healing, clothes, and supplying their needs as if those poor people were Jesus Himself. The face of those in need can be the face of Jesus. Jesus encourages humanity to help those in need; by doing this, they will be rewarded in the Kingdom of God. Ecojustice is part of reclaiming justice in the twenty-first century and the gospels such as Luke and Mathew are in line with this thinking. As many poor communities in need are being threatened by huge corporations and economic interests, communities need the gospel to fill in the void in the narrative of ecojustice that is often overlooked by society. Our foregrounding the presence, companionship, and role of God in

creation is vital to showing that God is on the side of creation. Thus, ecojustice, as the Gospels suggest, is about the intersection between the poor and nature. The importance of the message of Jesus, to serve the poor and save all creation, is also present in the other gospels.

The Gospel of John begins by affirming that Jesus always is, was with God, and is God (1:1). Jesus, the Word, is creation. John 1:1-18 is referred to as the “Genesis” of the New Testament because it establishes the divine identity of Jesus and his active role in creation as the Logos. Raymond Brown says that the Prologue is a hymn that encapsulates John’s view of Christ.¹²⁰ This hymn, that the early Christian communities sang including John’s community, teaches about God’s mission through Jesus for all creation. This view includes the mystery of creation, wisdom, and incarnation.¹²¹ Theological truths in this gospel are illustrated with images from nature as well as with the image of water that connects nature with God. Another vivid image in this gospel is the comparison of the Holy Spirit with a river of living and running waters (John 7:37-39). Jesus, as part of the community of the divine three persons, had an active role in the beginning of all creation. This role represents the articulated work in love and communion for the expression of the visible world that we can contemplate.

The communitarian and social aspect of the echoes of the trinity in the Gospel of John, especially in this first chapter, moves us to reflect in our work for our communities and for the wellbeing of our neighbors. The work of congregations in their communities that suffer by the sin of desacralizing nature can be inspired by John’s thematization of love and care toward creation that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father embody in the plot of the Gospel and express

¹²⁰ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1997), 337.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 338.

in the echoes of the trinity that John suggests in the prologue and throughout the gospel. The huge and long-lasting traditions of the Christian faith, about the doctrine of the trinity and its interpretations, will not be discussed here. The approach in these biblical interpretations is focused on the communitarian and social aspect of the divine trinity and what that example of unity and love can teach us today in our efforts for ecojustice in our communities. The congregations that participate in this investigation incarnate the body of Christ as part of their mission with their communities in search for ecojustice. The Gospel of John is a source for these communities.

Our communal work toward creation care must be present in the reference of the trinity. The reference of the trinity must guide us in an ethics of care, communion and continual creation. Leonardo Boff and Ivone Gebara share their theological views of the trinity appealing to the incarnation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in the ethics of care and love that emanates from the divine three persons in the trinity. Jesus' action with creation that is expressed throughout the Gospel of John and especially conveyed through the incarnation opens the Kingdom of God to this earthly life. Even the concept of the cosmos is a dominant theme in John and speaks to this Gospel as one that highlights creation. For John, the cosmos is God's creation and all are one in it.

As in the gospels, a theology of creation in the Pauline Corpus finds an affirmation of the divinity of Jesus and His participation in the origin of all things. Colossians 1:15-20 explains the role of Jesus, not only in creating all things—the visible and invisible ones—but also in reconciling everything in Him. Colossians 1:20, referring to Christ, states: “and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” The context and ideologies of early Christianity need a

theology of creation that affirms Jesus as creator of all things, a theology that flows counter current of the Hellenist beliefs about the physical world, which is seen as negligible. In Christ, the physical world is worthy, good, and created with a purpose and is included in the redemptive plan for all. The Nicene and the Apostolic Creed years later affirm God as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of creation. Fragments of the Nicene Creed say: “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heavens and earth, of all things visible and invisible... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, through Him all things were made.”¹²² The Apostolic Creed also states: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, I believe in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord...”¹²³ Both creeds describe Jesus as Savior and affirm the eternal life and the world to come.

The nonhuman creation has an important and vital participation in the redemptive plan of God. Romans 8:18-24 speaks to the eschatological hope that God has for His entire creation. This hope is related to an ongoing creation. In other words, the reality of suffering is present, but God has a special future for creation. Creation is groaning, for itself and for us, because we are all interconnected and interrelated. Ivone Gebara says that it is in the spirit of wisdom that humanity seeks and hopes for redemption, and it is in the spirit of wisdom that all creation, as Paul says “groan” in labor pains (Romans 8:22) in order to be freed from the multitude of slaveries that hold us in subjection.¹²⁴ This image is an ecological image. Yet beyond this interpretation, there is an image of hope of a new beginning of destruction of the past and

¹²² *The Nicene Creed*. Christian Reformed Church. (Crcna.org accessed July 3, 2019), 1.

¹²³ *The Apostles Creed*. Christian Reformed Church. (Crcna.org accessed July 3, 2019), 1.

¹²⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999), 91.

building new realities for humans and for the nonhuman creation. Amid labor pains, there is hope that transcends the immediate realities and has a purpose of freedom and peace. This is the kind of hope that is so necessary in our struggles for ecojustice in our communities and in our planet.

The hope for a better future for us and the whole creation is anticipated from the Hebrew Bible in Isaiah 65. It talks about the new heavens and new earth. Subsequently in Revelations, it assures the final victory of God above evil forces and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This reign of justice, peace, redemption, and love is part of our hope when we deal with ecojustice issues from our hard realities hearing the groan of creation and understanding our role as church for doing ecojustice in the twenty-first century. The New Testament and the early church are not absent in their discussions and inclusions of nature and creation. Moreover, to speak of justice in these traditions does not only mean justice toward humanity, it also means justice toward creation as represented in the discourses, images, and warnings about creation and nature. Two scholars who have continued this theme of nature and creation are Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff. They both offer relevant clues to continue to rethink the topic of the care of creation, ecotheology, ecojustice, and ecofeminism in the contexts of our times. Their attention that God is revealed through nature and that nature reveals God are both principles that inform my reading of the Scriptures. For sure, scripture is a source for doing ecojustice theology.

The biblical representations for ecojustice are present in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Ecotheology and the rereading of the Bible with “green” lenses have taught us that nature plays a key role in the history of salvation. Gebara and Boff bring wider perspectives to ecotheology, ecojustice, and ecofeminist from our times in their unique vision from the Southern hemisphere of the planet. Both Gebara and Boff present the option for those who suffer and are

more vulnerable in our global societies. The review of our knowledge is an active invitation to the church and to each one of us to consider what we have done to the earth and what we are going to do, assuming the great responsibility that God delegates in us to cultivate and keep the earth. This reflection contains practical theological implications for ecojustice challenges that Christian congregations face in their immediate communities and beyond in the common house that we serve.

CHAPTER THREE: ECOSTORIES OF HOPE: FOUR CHURCHES ACTIVE IN ECOJUSTICE ISSUES

Lived experiences of the struggles of people who united and worked efficiently for the wellbeing of the community with principles of love, justice, and peace are struggles that we should not forget. The eco-stories in this investigation are part of the environmental justice history of Puerto Rico. Christian community's active participation and solidarity has been a vital and significative support for environmental movements.

Ecostory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) At Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, Puerto Rico

“This situation instilled in our community and for generations to come, that there is no enemy nor giant that can stand before God’s presence.”¹²⁵

Hato Nuevo Ecojustice Leader

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo is in a valley between mountains in the rural area of the municipality of Guaynabo. Hato Nuevo church first opened its doors in 1930 and developed a loyal trajectory of service to God’s kingdom in the community. Beside the church facilities is Elena Farm. It is here, specifically on the Elena Farm (where the Guaynabo River begins) that a multinational giant, Browning Ferris Industries (BFI), arrived in 1988.¹²⁶ The company hid their intentions from 1988 until some neighbors discovered the plan to construct a regional industrial landfill and then an incinerator at Elena Farm. Nine brooks flow from Elena Farm that eventually form the Guaynabo River. Ecojustice leader B shared that this

¹²⁵ Ecojustice Leader B. Translation my own.

¹²⁶ Mike Williams, “Mision Industrial: Movement Building in Puerto Rico,” 10.

river, through Los Filtros Water Plant, provides drinkable water to the municipalities of Caguas, Guaynabo, and San Juan. BFI's plan was to build a landfill right where the river begins.

Environmental Context of Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo

Potable water supply is a planetary challenge. This project threatened the water supply to 600,000 people.¹²⁷ Danger of contamination was so serious because the landfill proposed was not only domestic but a regional and industrial one. In 1990 the community developed a newsletter named "*Juntos*" (We are together). A September 1990 *Juntos* edition informed that allowing this landfill in the Guaynabo River basin would also permit receiving toxic ashes from an incinerator proposed for San Juan. Dr. Neftalí García, a well-known environmentalist in Puerto Rico, explains that if we allow the incineration ashes to be deposited there, what will follow are significant amounts of strike concentrations of heavy metals like chrome, nickel, beryllium, and arsenic as well as bioxines (dioxins) and benzofuran, which pertain to the most toxic compounds produced by human activities.¹²⁸ Miss Zulma Canino, member of the Neighbors Committee gave a presentation in a public hearing rejecting the project. Canino says:

The landfill has the expectation of functioning sixteen hours, six days in a week and will fill our lives of noise, objectionable odors, traffic, and high environmental risks. The effects of this project will be noticed in our mental health, and in the worsening of pulmonary conditions that are present in this sector.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, March and April 4 1992.

¹²⁸ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, September 1 1990.

¹²⁹ Zulma Canino, "Aspectos Humanos" (Presentation VEGOVE Human Aspects) Planification Board of Puerto Rico (Public Hearing Guaynabo City Hall, Guaynabo, PR October 17, 1990), 4. Translation my own.

This statement is a significant one because it binds the physical and mental health as an integration that interconnects everything, because we are part of creation and what harms creation harms us as human beings. The elevated levels of anxiety and uncertainty for the outcome of the struggle against the BFI project affected the emotional health of the community throughout these years. The spiritual support that the church gave the community during this hard time and the spiritual resources that church has and practices enhance the capacity to resist.

Unfolding the Threat and Community Organization

The threatening of the community's peace of mind began before the neighbors knew about BFI. One of the ecojustice leaders and Angel Sosa helped discover the BFI's plans for Finca Elena.

Sosa shared:

We spread communication informing about the project and inviting to a community meeting. From this first meeting we organized the main committee: Dr. Osvaldo Rosario, Environmental and Technical Services, Miss. Doris Angleró, liaison with the press, Lic. Jaime Rodríguez, legal services, Mr. Israel Ortíz, liaison with the Community, Mr. Augusto Rosado, liaison with church, Miss Zulma Canino, communications, and Ángel Sosa, general coordinator.¹³⁰

The committee composed by the community's neighbors was a key element in the development of this fight, and from the beginning the church was present. Mike Williams says that the neighbors organized "*Vecinos de Guaynabo Opuestos al Vertedero en Hato Nuevo*" (VEGOVE). In English, that is Guaynabo Residents Against the Landfill.¹³¹ The church in Hato Nuevo assembly's decision was to get inserted in the struggle against the landfill from the beginning. Angel Sosa says that Rev. Jesús I. Chárriez, pastor of the CCDCHN contacted VEGOVE

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Mike Williams, "Mision Industrial: Movement Building in Puerto Rico," 10.

offering the church facilities for meetings and activities.¹³² The community and church joined a common cause.

The Church's Role in the Fight for Ecojustice

Ecojustice leader A stated that every Sunday in the church's services the announcements of the weekly activities included the actions related with VEGOVE. One of the ecojustice leaders from the CCDOCHN shared her life experiences with the ecojustice struggles from church:

In Church we celebrated: meetings, communitarian festival with the purpose of create environmental conscience, fund raising and integrated the neighbors; workshops of how to prepare signs for the peaceful protests. Symbols such as black flags in houses were used to represent mourning for nature and the rejection of the problem. We held constant prayer meetings, prayer chains, and fasting for justice for the environment.¹³³

The General Pastor of the CCDOC in Puerto Rico, Rev. Elías Cotto, sent a letter in opposition to the landfill project. The letter said that: "Using a beautiful farm of 316 acres where brooks exist and where when it rains the place receives between 80 and 90 inches of water will be an offense against God and humanity. Also, we will not be good stewards of the natural resources that God has put in our hands."¹³⁴ This letter is evidence of the Church's ethical commitment toward creation care and an affirmation of Christian stewardship. The VEGOVE Bulletin says:

Thank you so much to the neighbors and members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo and to their pastor Rev. Jesús I. Charriez whom diligently expand the scope of our community problem to the highest levels of their religious organization.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Document Facilitated by Ecojustice Leader B

¹³⁴ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)* Guaynabo, PR, October 1990.

The Church must express its prophetic voice, that is the voice of the people of God in a unique commitment with justice and truth.¹³⁵

This statement was a recognition from an organization composed of people from different religious and political beliefs, as well as people that did not attend the church, but they knew about the key role of church in this challenging situation. They celebrated the first year:

VEGOVE celebrated its first combative year on April fourteen of 1991, in the CCDOC in Hato Nuevo. Rev. Moisés Rosa, Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Concilium of Puerto Rico made a gratitude and petition prayer for strength before cutting the cake. During this celebration they recognized the leadership of Paulino Laguna because of his fidelity and unconditional help from the CCDOC and to Mis. Doris Angleró, because of her constancy and dynamism made our struggle transcends Hato Nuevo. I would like to thank Elizabeth, Marina, Elsie, Lydia, Esther, Augusto and Israel for the activity.¹³⁶

The community also received the support of the Episcopal Church, the Catholic Church, and *Misión Industrial*. Sosa says that the role of the church was vital since the first meeting.¹³⁷ The church was always praying and participating in the diverse activities with VEGOVE against the landfill project. The September 14, 1990 edition says that the Natural Resources Commission and the EQB commission of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico initiated public hearings, but they did not invite the community. Even though the community was not invited, 150 neighbors went, and the press covered this situation.¹³⁸ VEGOVE had activities almost every month. On August 10, 1990 an ocular visit of the Natural Resources Commission of the House of Representatives to the Elena Farm was held with 250 participants. It was a rainy day on which the same legislators and the participants could appreciate the environmental conditions of this

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, April 1991.

¹³⁷ Ángel Sosa, interview by Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira, June 12, 2019, transcript in author's possession.

¹³⁸ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, October 1990.

site.¹³⁹ On April 27, 1991, they participated all day in the public hearings in the Environmental Quality Board and more than 200 neighbors were present. The children and young people participated in this public hearing.¹⁴⁰ On October 11, 1991 VEGOVE protested, demanding the Natural Resources Commission of the House of Representatives take action in this case. From the Capitol they moved to the building of Natural Resources Agency, and various children gave a letter to Mr. Santos Rohena, the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources. From the Natural Resources building they moved to The Governor's Mansion, with children, youth, adults and elderly people gathering there to defend creation.¹⁴¹ Christmas was a time to continue the struggle. During Christmas VEGOVE made a Christmas card with an aerial photo and poem called *Decima* against the proposed BFI landfill and this card was sent to 17 agencies that were related to the permit process for this project.

Dangers and Opposite forces

The church, united with the community, was confronting a company with a history of fines. The BFI company pressured the governmental agencies to get the permission for this project. Williams shares that after VEGOVE won support from a number of United States (US) and Puerto Rican agencies that have jurisdiction over the landfill, BFI visited top officials in those agencies and managed to get the US EPA and US Geological Survey to soften or reverse their opposition to the landfill.¹⁴² The struggle was intense and unequal. During the process some

¹³⁹ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, August 1990.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Bulletin "Juntos" (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, October 1991.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

leaders' families suffered from painful experiences. Sosa shares that BFI identified where VEGOVE's leaders lived and spied on them. Sosa found a man inside a car in front of his house which was one of the persons that was spying on the VEGOVE leaders.¹⁴³ In addition, to the fight against the BFI project, adults and young people of the community were misinterpreted in their schools and jobs because of their struggle for ecojustice. Ecojustice leader A shared that her son, was accused of being a communist. She says:

He organized meetings and the youth got united and went on buses to manifestations. She remembered that a person in her job told her that there was no hope in this issue, that she must desist because that was "*planchao*" (term that is used when everything is coordinated and approved), but she affirmed if this is "*planchao*" we can reverse it. This ecojustice leader shared that they had difficult nights, crying, hardships, but that she, her husband and her children learned that the struggle is hard but there is a victory.¹⁴⁴

Facing great life challenges, these ecojustice processes taught us the value of perseverance, and the fight for ecojustice with all its lights and shadow, with challenges, dangers, costs and scope for present and future generations.

A United Community and a Great Victory

The community began to be recognized beyond Guaynabo. Canino described the unity and feeling of this fight in a fragment of her presentation in a public hearing:

“We can be a threatened community, harassed, helpless, but never defeated. On the contrary we are a fearless community because we are right. We are a group of men and women not rich in material goods, but rich in spiritual and moral forces. We are a wall composed of diverse blocks of colors, ages, and characters, different religions and political beliefs but firmly united in the defense of what is ours. We are overall Puerto Ricans in which hope, and dignity reside. The best evidence is that we are here in front of you, the elected persons by us to represent us to demand just one thing: justice. We

¹⁴³ Ángel Sosa's Interview, June 12, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Ecojustice Leader A.

expose the truth unveiling a project as not viable and a company as not trustworthy. The case that is in front of you gives you not only the opportunity to protect the health of thousands of citizens in and outside of Hato Nuevo, but also the opportunity to protect the valuable and scarce resources in our island as are the water and land.¹⁴⁵”

These relevant words were part of this tireless fight with the most ethical sense for caring for creation. After many public hearings, activities, intense fight, the EQB expressed its decision:

“The EQB said no to the BFI’s Landfill project. A year after the public hearings and a month after a VEGOVE’s peaceful protests in front of the EQB offices. This protest was in response to the anguishing wait for the review panel from the EQB and at last they responded categorically: “If the Planification Board has interest in continuing with the project they must contemplate another place. Water is a vital resource for our population and risks of contamination exist despite the best technology available.”¹⁴⁶

Even with the EQB decision, the community waited until having these decisions of governmental agencies in hard copy before celebrating the victory. The community waited until 1993 to declare victory and the Bulletin “*Juntos*” in October 1993 expressed it: “We have won over the second biggest solid waste company in the United States with simple but solid arms, our unity and our reason. We have won! We want a written rejection! Today we have it and because of this we celebrate. This Sunday, November 21, 1993, we are celebrating, at last.” The official closing activity against the landfill was celebrated in the CCDOCHN. On this occasion we received a summary about the resolution of the Planification Board and also knew more about a project for an incinerator proposed for Guaynabo. The Planification Board released the resolution related to the landfill in 1993.¹⁴⁷ The process of taking the decision and putting it in a written document

¹⁴⁵ Zulma Canino, “Aspectos Humanos” (Presentation VEGOVE Human Aspects), 8-9.

¹⁴⁶ Bulletin “*Juntos*” (... *We are together*), Guaynabo, PR, March-April 1992.

¹⁴⁷ Bulletin “*Juntos*” (... *We are together*), Guaynabo, PR, October 1993.

lasted more than two years. VEGOVE wrote a special note of gratitude to God in their bulletin in October 1993 for the victory against the landfill project:

“In these three years of fighting and waiting, full of anxieties, always we have sought God’s support. We have no doubt that God gave us strength, wisdom, and perseverance to achieve the triumph. Because of this we give thanks to him before anyone else, even if we go or don’t go to church, even when we chose a different way to talk to Him, we thank Him. “Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” (Psalm 103:1-2 NIV).¹⁴⁸

This recognition from VEGOVE helps us recover hope in the ecojustice challenges when the church manifests her call to be the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus on Earth. Dr. Osvaldo Rosario, member of VEGOVE, affirmed that the church’s role has been fundamental in the struggles they had in Hato Nuevo with the landfill and the incinerator, struggles that we won together.¹⁴⁹ The history of the struggle against the proposed Hato Nuevo landfill is part of the church’s history. In the Church’s 75th anniversary commemorative magazine a short narrative of this fight appears:

“I learned about the ecological conscience and environmental responsibility in my church. The fight for environmental justice from the faith’s perspective and the commitment of my church marked my conception of evangelism forever. Seeing the church following Jesus’ example in being beside the people in their needs, fighting against the antagonist powers of evil and oppression was a lesson for me.¹⁵⁰

This ecostory had inspired other stories and had brought hope to younger generations and adults that experienced this process. Ecojustice Leader B told us the fight seemed lost because it was against a multimillion-dollar, multinational company and we were a defenseless community

¹⁴⁸ *Bulletin “Juntos” (... We are together)*, Guaynabo, PR, October 1993.

¹⁴⁹ Dr. Osvaldo Rosario, interview by Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira, May 30, 2019, transcript in author’s possession.

¹⁵⁰ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Hato Nuevo. *Aniversario De Diamante (Diamond Anniversary) 1930-2005, Una Iglesia Firme, Constante y Creciendo en la Obra del Señor (A firm, constant church growing in God’s work)*, (Guaynabo, PR. 2005), 55.

against this monster. Ecojustice Leader B said: “We won the battle! The pertinent agencies did not give them the needed permissions. We saw the victory! This situation instilled in our community, and for generations to come, that there is no enemy that will stand before the presence of the Lord. Sometime later several initiatives to recycle began and the Guaynabo municipality has the best recycling programs on the island.

**Ecostory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
In Barrio Espinosa, Dorado, Puerto Rico**

*“When you fight for a just cause, you do not have to fear anything.”
Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal/Sarah Peish*

Small mountains surrounded the beautiful landscape of Barrio Espinosa at Dorado. Those mountains are called “mogotes”, and contain limestone, sinkholes, underground waters systems, and marvelous natural resources. This beautiful place had been threatened and affected during various decades because of selfish ambition of developers that did not consider nature’s value of this bioregion. This ecostory is filled with love for life, as well as with suffering because of health deterioration as a consequence of environment pollution. This ecostory is also pregnant of hope from the fight that is inserted in the church’s mission in Espinosa, Dorado.

Chronological Story of the Environmental Struggle Joining the Church Efforts

The fight for ecojustice emerged because of the establishment of an industry for the elaboration of cement in the sixties. Petra Camacho, an environmental writer, shares that the company name at its beginnings was Toa Cement, then San Juan Cement, and later they changed the name to ESSROC San Juan. The establishment of the company coincided with a government housing land development named *Parcelas Kuilan*. Many saw the Cement company as an employment

opportunity for the community.¹⁵¹ The employment opportunity idea did not last so long when the effects of the factory began to produce health effects on the community. Camacho says that in the seventies the fugitive dust was all over the temple and the community. Members of the CCDOC in Espinosa, Dorado belonged to the community and worked in the factory; this initiated a complex struggle of values, life value versus work value.¹⁵² Considering this complex situation and the increase of health problems, the consciousness of this issue increased also.

The response from the church began because of the complex situation that was developing in Espinosa. The church's response is a product of the biblical, theological, and gospel teachings that, since its origins, it had preached and taught. Camacho shares that the theological foundations that would guide the future church's members, active in the environmental struggle in the sixties, began to be taught in 1926.¹⁵³ This theology finds its praxis in the fight for ecojustice in daily life. Camacho states that:

The church's members and the people of the community developed an environmental conscience, and they raised their voice in public hearings. We remember Chano, Ana Rivera, Adela Olivo, Ana Isabel Rivera, Mario Elí Rivera, Hiram Cardona and many others, marching and praising the Lord singing and yelling their opposition.¹⁵⁴

This fight began with the giant, San Juan Cement, but it increased and got complicated with another industries with intentions to locate their projects in the same community. Ecojustice

¹⁵¹ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad (Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 Years in the Heart of the Community)* (Dorado, PR 2016), 138-139.

¹⁵² Ibid, 139.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 137.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 142.

leader H used the biblical image of David versus Goliath and compared the fight for ecojustice with this incredible battle. This brave community fought against the San Juan Cement, but also against seven more projects, some related to San Juan Cement and others, not.

The people in the community presented numerous health problems. Camacho states that the health problems presented, included asthma, dry cough, frequent cold or flu, skin and stomach problems.¹⁵⁵ The Espinosa community wrote an open letter in 1994 to the people of Puerto Rico identifying the serious effects of contamination in their zone. Cancer pulmonary illness, and skin problem incidence had multiplied in the population.¹⁵⁶ This contamination not only relates to the production of cement but to the burning of the fuel required for this production. Camacho shares that: This was the beginning of another fight, against the Safety Kleen Ecosystem Co.¹⁵⁷ Melanie Lenart says that the practice of burning these mixed toxic compounds had turned in a common practice in the United States five years previously, meanwhile in Puerto Rico this practice had existed for 14 years.¹⁵⁸ It will be interesting to analyze this fact through the lenses of decolonialism. Puerto Rico had suffered first and in a more prolonged way from this type of contamination.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 139.

¹⁵⁶ *Carta abierta de la Comunidad de Espinosa al pueblo Puertorriqueño (Open Letter for the Puerto Rican people from the Espinosa Community)*, 1994. Document in author's possession.

¹⁵⁷ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 140.

¹⁵⁸ Melanie, Lenart. "S. J. Cement May Renew Burning Practice," *The San Juan Star* (San Juan, PR), October 10, 1995.

The neighbors had been exposed to hazard pollutants in the air such as: beryllium, cadmium, chromium (carcinogenic elements), and the dioxins and benzofurans (a product used in the Vietnam War to produce the agent orange), selenium, silver, silica, aluminum, lead, mercury, fugitive dust, carbon dust, and others.¹⁵⁹ The contamination in Espinosa made the municipality of Dorado ask for a scientific study of the community from Dr. Neftalí García. Lenart says that the study included 42 families downwind from the plant and twenty families upwind. The study found that there was a difference in the rates of illness for communities downwind of the plant: Lenart states, “There are definite negative health effects-on the people downwind.”¹⁶⁰ The contamination affected the whole ecosystem. Mier Romue says that Safety Kleen discharged used waters without permission.¹⁶¹ Trees, animals, superficial and underground waters had been directly affected. The EPA Priority List affirmed that wells that provides water in Magüayo and Dorado downtown that served water to 67,000 are contaminated since 1980 with organic solvents.¹⁶² Groundwater contamination affects the water supply and disables it for human consumption.

In 1990, an asphalt plant had the intention to locate in Espinosa, Dorado. According to Sara del Valle, the neighbors become aware of the date for the public hearings near the date designated. They managed to go and oppose to the company to establish the asphalt plant in

¹⁵⁹ *Carta Abierta de la Comunidad de Espinosa al Pueblo Puertorriqueño.*

¹⁶⁰ Melanie, Lenart, “S. J. Cement May Renew Burning Practice,” *The San Juan Star* (San Juan, PR), October 10, 1995.

¹⁶¹ Mariano A. Mier Romeou, Safety-Kleen se Reorganiza (*Safety Kleen Reorganizes*). *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), September 21, 1992.

¹⁶² National Priorities List EPA Government Document OLEM/OSRTI Washington, DC 20460 363674 September 2016.

Espinosa. The EQB ruled in favor of the neighbors.¹⁶³ The church and community integration strengthened the communitarian and environmental fight for ecojustice in Espinosa, Dorado. The struggles continued and in 1992 the solid waste company Andres Reyes Burgos intended to establish in Espinosa. Antonio Otero mentions that the company rented an area in Espinosa to throw solid waste without having permission. “They arrived with a ‘recycling program’ but instead they began to take garbage, and the people complained.”¹⁶⁴ This is another example of how some companies behave and deteriorate the environment. Camacho says that as a result of the public hearings, the EQB decided in favor of the community.¹⁶⁵ This victory included the support of the municipalities of Dorado and Vega Alta. Both towns presented municipal ordinances prohibiting the trucks’ access to the neighborhood.¹⁶⁶ The Andres Reyes Burgos’s proposal was defeated. Camacho shares that Antonio Pérez, member of Espinosa church, was the president of the Environment Pro-Defense Committee in 1993.¹⁶⁷ The church and the community made multiple efforts to fight for caring God’s creation.

¹⁶³ Sara del Valle, ““Lugar Dulce” para las industrias,” (Sweet Place for Industries) *Claridad* (San Juan, PR), March 11 to 17, 1994.

¹⁶⁴ Carlos Antonio Otero, “Piden Junta Planificación Revise Proyecto,” (*The Planification Board Requested a Revision to the Project*), *Todo Norte* (Manatí, PR), June 23, 1994.

¹⁶⁵ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 142.

¹⁶⁶ Ordenanza Municipal (Municipality Ordinance) Num. 37 Serie 1993-1994, San Juan, PR (May 14, 1994).

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 140.

Practical Ecotheology from the Church Toward the Community

Pastoral and lay leadership internalized the urgency of God's call to serve the community with love. Camacho highlights the pastoral leadership styles that promote a more active church participation in these environmental issues. Camacho shares:

Rev. Lester Mc Grawth achieved the integration of the participation of church in the community problems in the church's working plan for the year 1994. The Church's facilities were open for the utilization of the Environment Pro-Defense Committee. Meetings, public hearings, and other activities were celebrated in the church. Rev. Justino Pérez Ojeda facilitated, organized, and opened the church's doors to the community.¹⁶⁸

Pastoral care broadened toward communitarian and environmental aspects was an organic way to seek God's Kingdom and its justice as a priority in life. The spiritual strategy they used was the ecumenical vigils to meet and pray together asking God for these environmental challenges. Camacho says that the church held the first vigil on April 22, 1994 in front of the plaza of Guarisco, Espinosa to thank God for the creation of the planet and to denounce the health problems suffered by the community in Espinosa.¹⁶⁹ This vigil also had the support of the CCDOC in Puerto Rico and of the General Pastor, Rev. Luis F. del Pilar. A letter was directed to all the CCDOC in Puerto Rico. The letter affirmed: "Protecting the environment in which we live it is not a choice, it is a duty of a good Christian stewardship."¹⁷⁰ The support on a denominational level in Puerto Rico is an example of collaboration of individual churches and the central level on issues of vital importance. One of the vigil leaders affirmed: "We recognize

¹⁶⁸ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 140.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 141.

¹⁷⁰ Luis F. del Pilar, *Carta Circular (Circular Letter) #19-94, Vigilia en Comunidad de Espinosa (Vigil in Espinosa Community)*, to all Pastors of the CCDOC in Puerto Rico, April 6, 1994. Document in author's possession.

the spiritual resources as tools for achieving justice.”¹⁷¹ The statement about the spiritual resources to achieve justice unveils a special knowledge and a wisdom for our church’s practice. This is a spirituality of a practical life. The fundamental changes that transform life is related to life in the spirit. A spirituality, not ethereal, but focused on achieving justice, is a spirituality for the practical life that can guide us every day.

The first vigil was a success and they decided to organize another one. Camacho says that on September 30, 1993, the church celebrated a vigil in front of the Capitol in San Juan:

Various persons integrated the organizing committee: Rev. Justino Pérez, Sr. Antonio Pérez, Sra. Petra Camacho and the Rev. Teresa Ortiz. We have the support of *Misión Industrial*, Parroquia Santa Ana, Lutheran Church of Magüayo and Dorado, Dominicos Convent in Río Lajas, UPR Planification School, Evangelical Concillium of Puerto Rico, El Volcán Catholic Church of Toa Baja. Government representatives, environmental agencies, and different communication media attended.¹⁷²

The scope of these efforts for unity and prayer helped to strengthen the environmental fight in Espinosa. The effort continues and the Environment Pro Defense Committee was incorporated in the Department of State as a nonprofit corporation organized under Puerto Rican laws on December 9, 1994.¹⁷³ San Juan Cement also made efforts to gain neighbors’ favor but at the same time they continued harming the health and environment. The letter from the San Juan Cement to Miss Violeta Maysonet is an example of these approaches: inviting the community to

¹⁷¹ Documento del *Orden de la Vigilia* del Viernes 22 de abril de 1994 (Vigil’s Document Order April 22, 1994), Bo. Espinosa de Dorado. 1994.

¹⁷² Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 141.

¹⁷³ Lourdes I. De Pierluisi, *Certificación del Departamento de Estado*, Registry (Certification of State Department Register) 26,370 H 1130626, December 9, 1994.

a Christmas party.¹⁷⁴ The public relationship efforts were not consistent with the bad practices of polluting the environment. A new threat emerged with the proposal of burning tires instead of using the industrial waste. The Environmental Defense Committee wrote a letter to EPA region 2 director, Engineer Carl-Axel Soderberg to know the official position of the agency related to burning tires of motor vehicles for the use of fuel and stating the necessity of a public hearing.¹⁷⁵ The committee gave a flyer inviting them to a seminary to learn how to be prepared for a public hearing on 1996 in the CCDOC in Espinosa, Dorado, PR.¹⁷⁶ This educational strategy opened the church's doors to empower people that probably would not dare participate in a public hearing.

The recognition for this whole trajectory of integrated struggles in favor of ecojustice became a reality. The Metropolitan University from Puerto Rico gave the Chelonia Prize to the Environmental Defense Committee of Bo. Espinosa, Dorado on January 25, 1997 for their struggle for environmental justice.¹⁷⁷ The Church in Espinosa had continued in a holistic way, integrating practices that demonstrate care for creation. Camacho also shares that the church created the Ministry of Environmental Health and a recycling program as part of its work plan. The topic of environmental protection has been present in the Department of Christian Education and in summer camps of children, youth and the elderly.¹⁷⁸ The church experienced how the

¹⁷⁴ Rolando Meléndez Santiago, *Carta de la San Juan Cement a Violeta Maysonet (Letter to Violeta Maysonet from the San Juan Cement)* November 16, 1995.

¹⁷⁵ Mario E. Rivera, *Carta al Ing. Carl-Axel P. Soderberg (Letter to Engineer Carl-Axel P. Soderberg)*, April 27, 1996.

¹⁷⁶ *Comité Pro-Medio Ambiente Bo. Espinosa, Dorado (Environmental Defense Committee Bo. Espinosa, Dorado)*. Taller de Artes Gráficas de Manatí. 1996.

¹⁷⁷ Placa del Premio en el Cuadro del Premio Chelona (Plaque in frame of Chelona Award), Universidad Metropolitana en Cupey, 1997.

¹⁷⁸ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 143-144.

gospel message integrated the environmental topic from the perspective of justice and love. The community continued suffering. Cobian quotes Petra Camacho, who explained that in 2001, there was an escape of crude limestone dust that affected the more than 400 families that live in that community. It seemed as if it were snowing. This occurred at 10:30 pm and no one went to warn the community.¹⁷⁹ The thoughtlessness toward the community was such that they did not even alert them to the danger so they could take preventive measures in their homes.

The community and the church in Espinosa were not alone in their fight for ecojustice. Camacho says that in 2001 the Center for Environmental Action, Inc. with its representative, Sarah Peisch, supported the community.¹⁸⁰ The church played a key role in the life of this fighter and she played a key role in church's life. Camacho says that the church ministered to and accompanied Sarah Peisch in her final battle against cancer. She experienced peace and a special joy through prayer and Christian support.¹⁸¹ What a beautiful story it is when we can share the love of God even amid life's greatest adversities! Sarah died and in 2008 we paid a posthumous tribute. The organizers gave a card with Sarah's photo and a quote that says: "When you fight for a just cause, there is nothing to fear." Sarah is a vivid memory of the interaction of love and support between church and community. A special book was published on the ninetieth Anniversary of the congregation in Espinosa, *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en*

¹⁷⁹ Mariana Cobian, "Contaminación Ambiental en Dorado: Vecinos del Barrio Espinosa Exigen Acción a la JCA" (Environmental pollution in Dorado: Espinosa's neighbors demand action to the Environmental Quality Board), *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR), October 23, 2001, 41.

¹⁸⁰ Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) en Espinosa, Dorado. *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 142.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 142.

Espinosa, Dorado: 90 Años en el corazón de una comunidad (Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 Years in the Heart of the Community). This book contains a whole chapter dedicated to the environmental struggles written by Petra Camacho.

The fight continues; a Colombian Company named Argos bought the San Juan Cement. Recently, in 2019, reports in the news, addressed the contamination that this plant generates. The Espinosa community and its church has seen multiple and incredible victories in the fight for ecojustice, but there still is a constant fight to win against this company that for more than 50 years has harmed the beautiful creation in Espinosa, Dorado. The CCDOC in Espinosa, Dorado turned to the Bible, prayer, and its theological understanding to rethink the situation of ecojustice they were living in light of Scriptures. The pastoral and lay leadership guided them in the process towards the development of ecotheology in the parishioners to respond to this ecojustice challenge.

**Ecostory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
In Garrochales, Arecibo, Puerto Rico**

“I believe that we must see the earth as the home of all of us and for that reason, we must respond to environmental struggles.”¹⁸²

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Bo. Garrochales at Arecibo has provided forty years of Christian service to the community. The church has served through its members in various environmental struggles that have affected the community for years. Arecibo is in the northern part of the island and it is surrounded by farms, agriculture, and cattle. The Ecojustice Leader C shared the environmental problems that they had suffered for years: “We are affected

¹⁸² Ecojustice Leader D.

mainly by the waste plant, illegal biochemical incinerators, and a landfill that affects the water and the environment. We had achieved that pharmaceuticals reduce the unnecessary contaminants, but only after they had contaminated the underground water. We have the incinerator threat, pending, and this is a risk of contamination. This ecostory is about the struggle of this community against an incinerator proposed for Arecibo.

Environmental Contexts

Historically, the community has suffered because of the pollution of pharmaceutical industries near it. Hunter and Arbona share that in September 1982, there was a toxic spill of the UpJohn Company of Barceloneta (in the Bo. Sabana Hoyos of Arecibo) and 57,000 l were spilled into the ground and underground water.¹⁸³ This toxic spill was so severe that these and other contaminating events in large areas of land and subsoil have been made unfit for agriculture. The large extensions of land in the North where pineapple was produced are not used. Additionally, they also have the Arecibo Landfill stretching alongside an important coastal water resource, the *Caño Tiburones*, a key wetland in the zone. Arecibo has many industrial activities including a recycling battery plant. Because of the battery recycling plant, the EPA declared Arecibo a non-attainment zone for exceeding the limits on lead pollution in the air.¹⁸⁴ For the dignity of the people and the earth, the community and the church opposed a project that will worsen the delicate ecosystem in Arecibo, a waste incinerator.

¹⁸³ John M. Hunter and Sonia I. Arbona, *Paradise Lost: An Introduction to the Geography of Water Pollution in Puerto Rico*, Michigan, Vol. 40 Num. 10 (1995): 1346-1347.

¹⁸⁴ Juan Manuel Torres Gutierrez, "Energy Answers Incinerator Poisoning Main Agricultural Region, Puerto Rico", *Environmental Justice Atlas* (June 13, 2017), <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/energy-answer-incinerator-poisoning-puerto-ricos-main-agricultural-region>.), 1.

The Incinerator Threat

The people's fight against the Energy Answers incinerator plant began several years ago. The proposed incinerator would burn 2,100 tons of solid waste daily, generating contaminants such as toxic ash and other substances including lead and dioxins in an area already contaminated with high levels of lead in the air.¹⁸⁵ In addition, the project proposed to extract 2.1 million gallons of water daily from wetland in the area of the *Caño Tiburones* (Tiburones Chanel) that is critical to the protection of the island against cyclonic tides.¹⁸⁶ This wetland is already affected by the Arecibo Landfill. The incinerator project in Bo. Cambalache, Arecibo had tried to become a reality twenty years ago but it had not been possible because of the Northern Region of the island massive opposition.¹⁸⁷ Regarding the process of waste incineration, the School of Public Health of the Medical Science Campus from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) affirms that, unquestionably, the incinerator produces carcinogenic substances, obstructive respiratory substances, irritating substances, including others that harm the human health.¹⁸⁸ Earth Justice Blog reported that the proposed incinerator would produce emanations of lead that are already in

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Hannah Chang, "How a Polluter is Capitalizing on Disaster in Puerto Rico," *Earth Justice* New York., December 15, 2017, (<https://earthjustice.org/blog/2017-december/how-a-polluter-is-capitalizing-on-disaster-in-puerto-rico>), 1.

¹⁸⁷ Rodríguez, Luis E. U., *Uso de Órdenes ejecutivas, Declaraciones de Emergencias y otros Instrumentos para Lograr Aprobación Expedita de Proyectos Complejos en Detrimento del Interés Público y en Violación del Orden Jurídico- El Caso del Incinerador de Arecibo (Executive Orders, Emergency Declarations, and other Instruments for the Expedite Approbation of Complex Projects in Detriment of the Public Interest and in Violation of the Legal Order- Arecibo Incinerator Case)*, Escrito Presentado ante el Congreso Internacional de Derecho Admnsitrativo auspiciado por el Foro Iberoamericano de Derecho Administrativo y la Escuela de Derecho de la Universidad de Puerto Rico en San Juan, PR October 28, 2015), 4.

¹⁸⁸ Facultad de la Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Recinto de Ciencias Médicas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, *Resolución en Contra de la Incineración de Desperdicios (Resolution against the Waste Incineration)*, Certificación Núm. 5 2012-2013. 2012

current violation of the air standards for lead in Arecibo.¹⁸⁹ The School of Public Health of the Medical Science Campus from the UPR affirmed that the result of the incineration of solid waste will be more pollution of the earth and waters, bioaccumulation in milk fat, in fish, and in vegetables because of the toxic ashes.¹⁹⁰ The community and the church fought against this giant because the health, mental peace and life itself of the people was in jeopardy.

The community organized a long-standing camp against the incinerator. Energy Answers sued, with a legal complaint, the people from the camp against the incineration, even when they were in their right to express their concerns. Griselle Vazquez, a journalist, says that Energy Answers company sued the members of the *Coalición de Organizaciones Anti Incineración (COAI)* (Coalition of Anti-incineration Organizations) in the Arecibo's Tribunal on June 23, 2017. This was an intention of intimidation and to divide the environmentalists.¹⁹¹ Energy Answers complaint was against twenty-four people and organizations including the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. The lawsuit was dismissed in court by Judge Santiago Cordero Osorio.¹⁹² The fight was intense and continued with the support of the CCDOCA, The Methodist Church in Puerto Rico, and diverse environmental organizations including the Camp Against Carbon Ashes in Peñuelas.

¹⁸⁹ Hannah Chang, "How a Polluter is Capitalizing on Disaster in Puerto Rico."

¹⁹⁰ Facultad de la Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Recinto de Ciencias Médicas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, *Resolución en Contra de la Incineración de Desperdicios*.

¹⁹¹ Griselle Vazquez, "Campamento seguirá en pie a pesar de demanda," (Camp will Continue Despite of the Lawsuit), *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR), 07/06/2017 <https://www.primerahora.com/elnorte/noticias/gobierno-politica/nota/campamentoseguiraenpieapesardedemanda-1233867/>.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Church's Role in the Struggle

The Church has been key in the environmental struggles when it integrated a healthy theology articulated with Jesus' practice in his ministry accompanying the people. The Board of the CCDOCA was consulted for the approval of the church's involvement in the struggle alongside the community and they agree. The Ecojustice Leader D shared that: "As church we are affirming a new theology in which we work with our land and how we take care for her. Teaching our children in an interactive and ecological way. We promote vegetable garden workshops and a way to provide food for the ones that more need it." The CCDOCA not only fought against the incinerator but meditated on ecotheology which guided them to have a broader ecological conscience. The pastoral and lay leadership educated in a way that creation care was demonstrated in concrete actions. The Ecojustice Leader E said: We supported the camp against the incinerator. The Ecojustice Leader C shares that one of the things that they have done is creation education programs, the celebration of Earth Day, Planet Earth Activities, recycling orientation, and biblical orientations in sermons. Having a pastor that has been involved in these kinds of social problems has helped us significantly. The pastoral leadership articulates an ecotheology from the pulpit and from the Christian education leaders to open ways of service. The Ecojustice Leader D shared that it is important that the church accomplish its accompanying role with God's wisdom, because many people that do not go to church need to see that church is present for them. The reflection that this ecojustice leader made invites us to think of how the people outside church see us, what opinion they have of us as believers in Christ.

Ecojustice struggles from inside the church produce a diversity of emotions. The Ecojustice Leader C shares that her mission is to maintain the church informed and transmit what

motivates people to fight, educating and inviting the church to participate. The involvement in this ecojustice process brought satisfaction to church members. The Ecojustice Leader E says that for her this was a satisfying experience when she saw the commitment supporting the fight for ecojustice even when these persons were ill and they fought with the strength that they had, and she was inspired by this example. The process provided a mutual and continuous learning process between neighbors, the church, the scientific community, environmental organizations that joined to help, municipalities, lawyers, that reached the courts to defend the rights for just processes, and the ecologic equilibrium of a zone already degraded by diverse environmental problems. These dynamics evolved to a peaceful resistance for ecojustice. The Ecojustice Leader D shares, “We have learned that this is a Christian education process in a long term.” Related to the collaborative learning process, the Ecojustice Leader E says that we have to lift our voice as a church because we are creation stewards. The church fought side by side with the community. They shared their facilities for meetings and diverse activities related with the fight against the incinerator. They participated in public hearings and in peaceful manifestations.

Advances in the Fight and Proposed Alternatives

The Project of Energy Answers Incinerator in 2010 had the intention to develop quickly. Rodríguez says that the process for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was an extraordinary one and was on a fast track under Executive Order Num. 34 of 2010, bolstered by Governor Luis Fortuño.¹⁹³ The process for the EIS lacked important elements. Rodríguez states that the EIS containing errors, obsolete studies, and promises without foundation, is an

¹⁹³ Rodríguez, Luis E. U. *Uso de Órdenes ejecutivas, Declaraciones de Emergencias y otros Instrumentos para lograr Aprobación Expedita de Proyectos Complejos en Detrimento del Interés Público y en Violación del Orden Jurídico- El Caso del Incinerador de Arecibo*, 17.

incomplete and superficial EIS.¹⁹⁴ Considering this context, the affected communities understood that their struggle would be more intense than a normal process for a complex project of an incinerator.

The Association of Mayors of Puerto Rico and Federation of Mayors of Puerto Rico are organizations that joined the community claims against the incinerator. The Association of Mayors wrote a letter to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), specifically to the Rural Utilities Services (RUS) because Energy Answers applied for a loan with them to finance their project. The letter from the Association of Mayors that is opposed to the project was sent on August 20, 2015, and states:

“The position of the Association of Mayors of Puerto Rico is that the EIS for the Energy Answers Project does not contain the essential and critical information because of the significant harm and foreseeable socioeconomic impacts in the municipalities affected in their operational budgets and public services because of an increase in transport cost and costs associated to municipal solid waste to the Arecibo’s incinerator. The agency must deny the financial assistant for Energy Answers.¹⁹⁵”

The same year, the Federation of Mayors sent a letter to the USDA/RUS also against the Arecibo’s incinerator project. The letter sent by Reinaldo Paniagua states that:

The Federation of Mayors wants to express profound concern because of the lack of information in the EIS draft in the financial model of the project. EIS does not present the economic impacts to the affected municipalities if they were required to give their municipal waste to Energy Answers for incineration.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

¹⁹⁵ Rolando Ortíz Velazquez, President of the Mayor’s Association to USDA/RUS, Arecibo’s Incineration Rejection, August 20, 2015, Document in author’s possession.

¹⁹⁶ Reinaldo Paniagua, President of the Mayor’s Federation to USDA/RUS August 19, 2015. Document in author’s possession.

With these important organizations against the project, the fight of the community continues in advance. In a letter from the Graduate School of Public Health from the Medical Sciences Campus of the UPR in March 2015, addressed to Engineer José Font, the Executive Director of EPA from Region 2, sent a resolution approved on December 17, 2014 that stated their position against the approval of an incinerator in Arecibo.¹⁹⁷ More organizations continued to join the cause. CAMBIO helped the community in the fight against the proposed incinerator. This organization made a presentation in a public hearing on August 21, 2015. In the presentation to RUS they brought arguments against this project. Biaggi and Rodríguez state that:

It seems suspicious that RUS considers to financing a project incompatible with the health and environmental protection and that will generate less than 0.026 percent of Puerto Rico energy demands. It is contradictory that RUS separates from its tradition to serve and attend the necessities of rural communities, to consider giving support to a financial project that is un-pleasant and rejected by the community in which it plans to operate. It is also rejected by the community in which the project plans to deposit the ashes that the process will generate. Facing the economic and fiscal challenges that Puerto Rico confronts is irresponsible on the part of RUS and the federal government to contribute to the crisis, imposing another burden on the people of Puerto Rico.¹⁹⁸

This presentation covers all the main reasons why this project is not viable for Arecibo nor Puerto Rico. CAMBIO sent a letter to Steve Polacek, specialist in environmental protection from the Federal Agriculture Department. The letter, dated on March 6, 2017, described that this project will have the negative effects in the recycling efforts on the island, negative effects in the ecosystem. This project is financially, environmentally, and socially unsustainable.¹⁹⁹ This letter

¹⁹⁷ Facultad de la Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Recinto de Ciencias Médicas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, *Resolución en Contra de la Incineración de Desperdicios*.

¹⁹⁸ Ingrid Vila Biaggi y Luis E. Rodríguez Rivera, *Ponencia ante Departamento de Agricultura Federal Borrador de Declaración de Impacto Ambiental Incinerador de Arecibo (Presentation for the Federal Agriculture Department Environmental Impact Statement of the Arecibo Incenerator Draft)*, 20 de Agosto de 2015.

¹⁹⁹ Ingrid Vila Biaggi y Luis E. Rodríguez Rivera, *Carta a Steve Polacek (Letter to Steve Polacek)*, Environmental Protection Specialist USDA/RD/RUS/WEP/EES, 12-13.

coincided with the pressure that the community was producing in the local and federal agencies. In 2017, after Hurricane María, the fight was more complicated. This event generated disaster, flooding, losses, and many solid wastes that were used as an excuse to move the project of Energy Answers forward. Caro González says that:

Myrna Conty, the coordinator of the COAI objected to the process of public hearings announced by Noel Zamot because people interested in participating had to do it through an internet site of critical projects of the Financial Oversight and Management Board from Puerto Rico. Conty reclaimed that the citizens did not have electricity nor internet and could not seek for a computer to comment and participate.²⁰⁰

One of the prominent figures that joined the fight of the community was the Chicago Congress Representative, Luis Gutierrez. Gutierrez says that this project is a dirty one, because it not only produced pollution, but it has been developed under hidden doors and we do not know who is paying for the lobbying to complete this project.²⁰¹ Representative Gutierrez's support played a key role in the community's fight against the incinerator.

Victory

The fight was intense, hard, and long lasting, but it produced fruit. Chang says that in May 2017, RUS notified Energy Answers that the agency will not consider a loan for this project.²⁰² This was the first step against this project. Ricardo Roselló Nevarez, Puerto Rico's governor,

²⁰⁰ Laysa Caro González, "Energy Answers Incinerator: The Struggle continues" *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), January 16 2018, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/energyanswersincineratorthestrugglecontinues-2390339/>.

²⁰¹ U.S. Rep. Gutierrez Blasts Puerto Rico Fiscal Board over Arecibo Incinerator, January 15, 2018, *Caribbean Business* (Guaynabo, PR), January 15, 2018, <https://caribbeanbusiness.com/u-s-rep-gutierrez-blasts-fiscal-board-over-arecibo-incinerator/>

²⁰² Hannah Chang, "How a Polluter is Capitalizing on Disaster in Puerto Rico"

announced that after Hurricane Irma and María the Energy Answers project in Arecibo was not part of the public policy in his administration.²⁰³ This announcement gave happiness to the community, but they kept alert to any change. The community was happy and grateful for all the support from all sectors and for the solidarity of whom the CCDOCA was part.

This experience is one that the ecojustice leaders describe as a great learning experience. The Ecojustice Leader D told us that we must connect with each other and with other environmental struggles and connect with justice. This ecojustice leader called to the mutual support between the communities that confront environmental problems. “Support these fights and we will be closer to justice.” Faith in action, from a practical theology, gave testimony of God’s love and its accompaniment to just causes. The richness of the lived experience awakened hope in many people, hope that is forged in the intense struggles for ecojustice. The Ecojustice Leader D says that: I believed that we must see the earth as the home of all of us and for that reason, we must respond to environmental struggles. The church and community fought for ecojustice to write a new chapter in the environmental history of Puerto Rico.

**Ecostory of the United Evangelical Church
In Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas, Puerto Rico**

“First we put first our Faith in God, then our love for the people and then our love for the Earth.”²⁰⁴

The United Evangelical Church at Tallaboa Encarnación initiated its mission in Peñuelas in 1904. The church has 115 years serving the community and being witness of the many historical

²⁰³ “Roselló Retira Apoyo a Incineradora de Arecibo,” *Periódico Metro* (San Juan, PR), February 10, 2018, <https://www.metro.pr/pr/noticias/2018/02/10/rossello-retira-apoyo-incineradora-arecibo.html>.

²⁰⁴ Ecojustice Leader M.

transformations. Located in a coastal area surrounded by abandoned and functioning industrial sites, the church had developed its ministry. Peñuelas is one of the most environmentally affected towns in Puerto Rico. This town was the place for the experiment of a series of industrial petrochemical projects in the middle of the past century.

Tallaboa Encarnación community had endured intense environmental problems that had affected the community's health and the quality of life of the people for decades. In addition to the environmental contamination, the community is also dealing with toxic ash deposits from the Coal Plant, Applied Energy Solutions (AES) in Guayama. The church's most recent environmental struggle is against the ashes in Peñuelas. The church members and clergy accompanied the community in this difficult and long-lasting issue that called the attention of the entire island.

Peñuela's Environmental Contexts

The industrial revolution in Puerto Rico began with a government operation named "*Manos a la Obra*" in the second half of the last century. In this vision of progress a project emerges named The Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (CORCO). The government incorporated CORCO on May 19, 1953, for the purpose of constructing and operating an oil refinery on a site located on deep water on Guayanilla bay.²⁰⁵ Guayanilla bay is beside Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas. The Ecojustice leader K shares that he was born on the CORCO site, before CORCO occupied that area. The government displaced the community for the construction of CORCO. CORCO's

²⁰⁵ CORCO, "Informe Anual 1997," Commonwealth Oil Company, Inc. Documento Archivo General de Puerto Rico. Sala de Estudio y Referencia Pedido de Documentos Fondo: PRIDCO, Serie: Promoción Industrial II, Cajas: 21 provicional, May 3, 2019.

operation not only affected the health and the quality of life of nearby families but the ecosystem was affected, also. Oil spills occurred in 1962 when the Italian tanker “Argea Prima” contaminated the coast of Guayanilla and Peñuelas.²⁰⁶ The spills affected the marine life. The CORCO continued operations but fluctuations in oil price and economic losses contributed to the closing of the company. In addition, some areas of the CORCO plant have continued operations.

The ecojustice leaders of the Evangelical United Church from Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas shared with us other challenges that they had encountered. Frances Rosario says that the community has fought against the acid plant because of the company mismanagement of the Industrial Chemicals company.²⁰⁷ The contamination also affected the economy in the fishing industry. The Industrial Chemicals company had been identified in 2018, for dangerous chemical discharge to the bay and for the release of toxic particulates risking the neighbors and the students of the school, Jorge Lucas Valdivieso.²⁰⁸ The population of this area had a high exposition in a consistent and long-term form that had affected also the younger generations.

The Ecojustice Leader J says that the community also suffered from asbestos and sulphur contamination. The community also fought against a gas pipeline proposed for Puerto Rico. The Ecojustice Leader J shared that the fight against the gas pipeline was intense and, united to other

²⁰⁶ Van Houten Associates, Inc. Summary of Preliminary Report Site Screening Study for Deep Water Port and Industrial Complex, July 30, 1973, New York, (Documento Archivo General de Puerto Rico. Sala de Estudio y Referencia Pedido de Documentos Fondo: PRIDCO, Serie: Promoción Industrial II, Cajas: 21 provisional, May 3, 2019), 78.

²⁰⁷ Frances Rosario, “Erosión Causada por Terremotos Provoca que Piedras de Azufre Caigan al Mar (Coastal erosion caused by earthquakes produced Sulphur Stones fell into the Sea)” *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR), January 31, 2020, 1.

²⁰⁸ Jason Rodríguez, “Empleados Denuncian contaminación con químicos en Tallaboa,” (Employees denounced chemical contamination in Tallaboa). *La Perla del Sur: La Noticia que te Llega* (Ponce, PR), October 3, 2018.

environmental groups, they won. The removal of one of CORCO's towers affected the community. The Ecojustice Leader L says that the towers had asbestos and the school had to close because of the asbestos cloud. This event not only affected the school but also the church and the community's houses. Asbestos is a harmful material that can cause cancer. The community also has ECO Eléctrica an energy plant that operates with natural gas (Methane gas).

The most recent environmental struggle was the toxic ashes deposit in the Peñuelas landfill that had worsened the community's health. The newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, reports that the AES dispose of more than a million pounds of ash daily; these ashes contains minor quantities of heavy metals including arsenic, selenium, lead, mercury and cadmium, many of them that cause cancer in human beings.²⁰⁹ EPA studies confirmed this data. In an EPA study Garrabrants, Kosson, DeLapp and Kariher, found arsenic, bromine, chlorine, and chromium to have more than one hundred times proportion the permitted proportion according to leachate tests.²¹⁰ This EPA study has strong evidence that ashes contain these elements in levels that surpass the security levels. Estrada says that between 2004 and 2011, billions of tons of ash were deposited through Puerto Rico by AES plant. In the construction of urbanizations and roads in Guayama, San Juan, Dorado, Toa Alta, Caguas, Juncos, Ponce, Santa Isabel, Coamo, Arroyo and

²⁰⁹ "Combaten las Cenizas de Carbón, 19 de diciembre de 2011," *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), February 3, 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/combatenlascenizasdecarbon-1146905/>.

²¹⁰ A.C. Garrabrants, D.S. Kosson, R. Delapp, Peter Karinher, *Leaching Behavior of "Agremax" collected from a Coal-Fired Power Coal-Fired Power Plant in Puerto Rico*, December 2012 EPA-600/R-12?724. 2012. <http://nepis.epa.gov/Adobe/PDF/P100G02B.pdf>.

Mayagüez the construction companies used ash deposit as filler material.²¹¹ The ash that comes from the AES plant in Guayama were transported in trucks without the protection measures.

Community Organization and the Church's Role in the Struggle

The Peñuelas community has endured many years of environmental struggles. The victory of the southern gas pipeline fight strengthened the community, and this helped the neighbors confront another giant that threatened the Peñuelas peoples' health again. The community organized a permanent camp in the entrance of Peñuelas near the Peñuelas Landfill. The leaders of United Evangelical Church of Tallaboa (UECT) Encarnacion, Peñuelas, were present in this fight. The *Faith and Order Declaration document of the United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico* affirms that human beings have a responsibility to restore, maintain, and defend the creation through concrete and clear actions.²¹² The United Evangelical Church affirmation from the ethical perspective invites everyone to rethink our theological understandings and how this understanding can guide us into concrete actions toward ecojustice.

The church's peaceful role was evident in moments of high tension during the carbon ash struggle. The Ecojustice Leader L shared that the church has been conciliatory and a peaceful mediator supporting the citizens and the environmental groups in peaceful protests and orienting the community. The Ecojustice Leader M told us that as members of the congregation of Tallaboa we had focused on being peaceful facilitators in the midst of different manifestations between different persons and between the citizens and the police. The congregation in Tallaboa

²¹¹ Elvin Estrada, "Cenizas de Carbón en Puerto Rico: un problema ambiental y de salud (Carbon Ashes in Puerto Rico: An Environmental and Health Problem)," *Ciencia Puerto Rico*. December 9, 2016, <http://www.cienciapr.org/es/blogs/members/cenizas-de-carbon-en-puerto-rico-un-problema-ambiental-y-de-salud>.

²¹² Iglesia Evangélica Unida de Puerto Rico, *Declaración de Fe y Orden (Faith and Order Declaration)*, (Approved in extraordinary assembly celebrated the days August 22, 1998 and October 9, 1999, Caguas, PR. 1999).

Encarnación Peñuelas has active members in the environmental struggle and this fact has been an opportunity to bring peace and calm in difficult moments. The Ecojustice Leader K says that when the community protested or made a manifestation and community leaders observed the presence of church's members, they feel supported and stronger.

The denomination and the General Pastor, Rev. Edward Rivera, and other churches supported the church in Peñuelas in their environmental struggle. Presence, communication, and recognizing the church efforts were part of the support the denomination gave to the community and the church. The Annual Assembly of the Evangelical United Church in Puerto Rico recognized the church in Tallaboa Encarnación at Peñuelas for its fight for ecojustice and they received a certificate for the work they had done in caring for creation. The Denominational Assembly in 2019, gave the certificate to the "Ashes Camp" (2016-2019).²¹³ This recognition is an example for other congregations and a motivation to do continuous work while caring for God's creation.

The church helped to educate the community organizing health fairs, visiting the neighbors that were ill, and was very active giving support in a way that the neighbors called the church "the neighboring church." The Ecojustice Leader L said that the community had identified the church as a neighbor who gives its attention to the community. The church is focused on what the community needs and feels. The church had organized walks, and ecumenical events with other pastors from other congregations and the catholic priest. The impact on the community is a testimony of being present with the people in their needs. Ivone Gebara, in her ecotheology, talks about the importance of living near the most vulnerable and

²¹³ Iglesia Evangélica Unida de Puerto Rico, Certificado A: "Campamento de las Cenizas" (2016-2019) (Certificate given by the United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico To: Ashes' camp (2016-2019) Luquillo, Puerto Rico, March 15, 2019.

accompany them as part of being the church of Jesus Christ. When the congregation visited the most in need and prayed in the midst of the fight, reflected Jesus' incarnation ministry in the context in which they had served.

Being present with the community in difficult moments of the struggles for ecojustice has introduced diverse dynamics inside the congregation. Members of the congregation are police officers and other members of this congregation are ecojustice leaders and both have found themselves on opposite sides in the protests. This reality brought some resistance dynamics to the ecojustice struggle in the midst of the congregation. The Ecojustice Leader L shared that some members did not understand the church's role in the environmental problems of the community. Some police officers, that were church members, felt rejected or discriminated by some protest participants that did not belong to church, because they were police officers. Other members thought that the church involvement in this particular environmental issue was linked to secular movements or personal interests and others were indifferent about the environmental issue. In any congregation, diverse ways of thinking always exists.

The congregation managed the difficult resistance that emerged in the congregation in a diligent way. Ecojustice Leader L shares that, "Thanks to God Almighty, some members that had left, returned because we can manage the resistance in an effective way." The same leader says that the Board managed the resistance with wisdom, and they visited and educated the members that left, and some returned. Wisdom and love overcame the different understandings of the same situation.

Advances in the Struggle

The images on the news of the manifestations of those opposed to the ash deposit reflected the tension between the police officers that protected the AES's trucks and the protesters. Alfonso says that with government support, police escort, and over 300 police officers and helicopters, AES reinitiated the transport of the toxic ashes to the Peñuelas Landfill.²¹⁴ Ecojustice Leader K shared that these were difficult moments for the community in Peñuelas. The Police arrested one of the ecojustice leaders on two occasions. Ecojustice leaders were present in the prayer services celebrated in the camp against the ashes and in the peaceful manifestations against the practice of depositing ashes. The struggle transcended Puerto Rico. The Ecojustice Leader J went to the United States Congress and exposed the contamination caused by the ashes. This same leader traveled then to Jerusalem and put the petition for the end of this contamination in the Wailing Wall. God answered the petition, and community's victory was a blessing for all those whom supported the fight against the deposit of coal ashes in Peñuelas.

Overcoming

The advances in this fight increased in legal processes. Estrada Torres states that The Supreme Court validated the municipal ordinance that prohibits the use and disposition of carbon ashes in its jurisdiction.²¹⁵ The Supreme Court decision in December 2016, was key in this process because the Court of Appeals had previously allowed the ash deposit in Peñuelas. The Supreme

²¹⁴ Omar Alfonso, "Bomba de Tiempo, las Cenizas de Carbón, Viven y Juegan entre el Arsénico de las Cenizas de AES," *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, La Perla del Sur* (Ponce, PR), August, 20, 2019, <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/08/viven-y-juegan-entre-el-arsenico-de-las-cenizas-de-aes/>.

²¹⁵ Michelle Estrada Torres, "EC Waste le Aclara a la Jefa Policial," (EC Waste Talks with the Police Department Chief), *Primera Hora* (San Juan, PR), December 30, 2016, 33.

Court decision is above the Court of Appeals. The community won a victory in their fight for ecojustice. Two years have passed since AES has deposited ashes in Peñuelas Landfill. The achievement of stopping the ash deposit is a great victory, but the community is alert and going forward. This victory started the claim that it is not necessary to produce energy from coal that pollutes the environment and harms people's health.

The Prohibition of Ashes Deposit in all the territory of Puerto Rico became law in 2019. Governor Hon. Wanda Vazquez Garced informed to all Puerto Rico that the senatorial project that prohibits the coal ashes in Puerto Rico is a reality.²¹⁶ But the ideal situation will be not having the coal ashes, and the community is still fighting against the fossil fuel energy industry, especially the coal industry. There are many more victories to achieve in the ecojustices fights in Peñuelas and in all Puerto Rico. These ecojustice leaders brought us an excellent example of Christian service from the action for the wellbeing of the communities and nature. The Ecojustice Leader J affirms that, "We cannot be silent when there is an environmental problem in your surroundings." Jesus said that, "I tell you," "he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:40). The voice and the path of the church in the community is the voice and path of Jesus on Earth. Jesús did not kept quiet in front of the injustices in his time. He denounced it and worked for justice, peace, and love. The United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa Encarnación in Peñuelas did not kept quiet when facing environmental injustice in the community. Instead, they prayed, walked with the people, accompanied them, and were a peace mediator in their ecojustice leaders.

²¹⁶ Ricardo Cortés Chico, "Wanda Vazquez Firma Ley que Prohíbe el Depósito de las Cenizas de Carbón," *El Nuevo Día* (San Juan, PR), 2 de enero 2020, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/wandavazquezfirmaleyqueprohibeeldepositodecenizasdecarbon-2538437/>.

CHAPTER FOUR: LESSONS FOR TOA ALTA

The process for this project was a learning experience from the selection of the groups that participated in the focus group interviews, from the ecojustice congregations through the Biblical Lesson Series in ecojustice shared in the Toa Alta congregation. The process lasted six months from the selection of the participants through the completion of the focus group interviews.

Table 1: Orientation Process for Eco Justice Group

Group Orientation	Date	Participants
United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa-Encarnación, Peñuelas, Puerto Rico	May 11, 2019 / 9 AM	5
Meeting with the General Pastor of the United Evangelical Church in Puerto Rico	May 15, 2019 / 10 AM	1
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales, Arecibo, Puerto Rico	May 11, 2019 / 3 PM	3
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Espinosa, Dorado, Puerto Rico	May 13, 2019 / 10 AM	3
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo, Guynabo, Puerto Rico	May 29, 2019 / 7:30 PM	2

Table 2: Orientation Process for Toa Alta Congregation and Lesson Series Dates

Meetings	Dates
Church Board Meeting for Project Orientation	August 7, 2019
Flyer and Church Members Letters	August 25, 2019
Orientation to the Entire Congregation	August 25, 2019 and September 1, 2019
Consent Document Orientation	September 1, 8 and 15, 2019
Lesson Series on Ecojustice Dates	September 22 and 29, 2019 and October 6 and 13, 2019

Table 3: Sample Collection Dates

Group Meetings	Date	Participants
Ecojustice Focus Group Interview	August 17, 2019	13
Prequestionnaire Toa Alta	September 22, 2019	50
Postquestionnaire Toa Alta	October 13, 2019	42
Toa Alta Focus Group AM	October 17, 2019	10
Toa Alta Focus Group PM	October 18, 2019	15

Methodology

According to the protocols established for this investigation, we began calling the pastor of each congregation and asking for permission to write to the board of each church so they could decide if they wanted to participate in the project. As soon as the pastors of each congregation agreed, we sent the letters. The CCDOCHN, Guaynabo, the CCDOCE, Dorado, and the CCDOCA, Arecibo, agreed to participate in the investigation. The first UEC in Peñuelas which we asked first, did not accept our invitation to participate. Then we accessed another UECTU, this time in Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas, a congregation very near to the environmental problem's site. This second congregation agreed to participate, but I needed to ask permission from the General Pastor of their denomination on the island. I had an interview and presented the purpose of the investigation. He agreed that the congregation in Tallaboa, Encarnación, would participate in the investigation.

The next step was coordinating the meetings of the four churches that accepted to participate. The meetings were with the members of each church that had been ecojustice leaders in their communities. The first church that we attended was the UECT, Encarnación en Peñuelas. This first meeting taught me a lot about the environmental problems in the communities. My mind was set to investigate how the church had supported the community in one specific

environmental problem. To my surprise I found not only one, but several kinds of long-term environmental problems that had affected and were still affecting the community. The second meeting was the same day in Garrochales, Arecibo, and I perceived the same pattern of many environmental problems that affected the same community for many years. The third meeting was in Espinosa, Dorado, and as the other two ecojustice congregations, this one also had endured a long path of struggles for their health because of many environmental challenges. I was overwhelmed and their stories made an impact in my life. The last meeting to explain the process and give the consent to participate in the investigation was in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo. The difference between the Hato Nuevo congregation and the others was that the environmental problem that they faced was years ago. Hato Nuevo did not have another great environmental challenge in the past years. All the ecojustice leaders were very enthusiastic to share their experiences in this initial meeting. Additionally, I gave them the consent form and explained the process of the investigation. They talked with pride about their participations in the struggles of their communities for eco-justice. I took notes about their experiences even when I did not contemplate that they would begin sharing in this first meeting. Also, I was surprised and grateful because they brought documents, letters, and newsletters about the environmental struggles in their communities to that first orientation meeting. All of them had a genuine wish to collaborate. I was grateful for that. They wanted to share their ecostories to others who could hear. All the ecojustice leaders of these churches agreed to participate and completed the consent form in this initial meeting.

The ecojustice group consists of the ecojustice leaders of the four congregations that agreed to participate. The next step was coordinating the date for the ecojustice focus group

interview. Since we began the meetings in the churches on May 11, 2019, we finally had the date: August 17, 2019. In preparation for the Eco-justice focus group interview, I asked permission to use a meeting room in the headquarters of the CCDOC denomination in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The General Pastor, Rev. Michael Morales, had agreed, and this was the place the focus group interview was held.



Photo 2: Ecojustice Focus Group Interview room

Before this meeting, I had to organize some aspects, such as coordinate with two persons that would take the videos for the focus group interview, and two persons that would help take notes while the participants talked. Also, I coordinated with my family and bought the snacks at the beginning of the meeting and the lunch after the experience.

I gave the Eco-justice Questionnaire to the focus group before the interview. Before we began, I established some basic rules. The interview process was recorded in video. I had two persons taking notes. Meanwhile, I was leading the conversation by asking the questions that I

already had shared with them. I took some notes, but I focused on the conversation. Another person assisted me in receiving each participant and guiding them to write their name in a confidential list that would identify their commentaries and questionnaires with a specific letter (A, B, C...). This identification was only for research purposes. Also, as the protocol expressed, I gave each of the participants a list of counselors and health professionals if they needed to access some help. The Associate Pastor in Family and Church Growth, Rev. Geritza Olivella, welcomed us and affirmed the valuable contribution of caring for the earth that they had showed through the years. The experience was unique; the atmosphere of that room was filled with a spirit of *koinonia* and freedom. The participants affirmed one another in similar experiences in their communities. The ecojustice groups shared biblical images that helped them cope with the struggles in their communities. The ecojustice leaders in the first meetings and in the interview repeated the image of the depiction of David and Goliath in the epic story. The ecojustice leaders compare themselves and the church's community with David fighting Goliath, compared to the multinationals and multimillionaires' companies that pollute the environment for the utilitarianism values of the capitalistic society. Near the end of the interview, all of us were moved by others' ecostories. I could not describe the experience in words, but all were touched. The focus group interview lasted two hours and a half as we described it in the IRB protocol. They all received our gratitude at the beginning and at the end of the process, we gave them a small medicinal plant in gratitude. Also, they receive the gasoline stipend as established in the IRB protocol for this investigation. The expressions of one of the ecojustice leaders from Espinosa was outstanding. He described the focus group interview as one of the most beautiful experiences of his life in church. I understand that maybe this was an experience in which hard struggles were recognized. This did not happen so frequently and especially with environmental

topics in our congregations in Puerto Rico. The ecostories that they shared in the questionnaires and the conversation in the focus group were the matrix for writing the four lessons about ecojustice for Toa Alta Church.

Ecojustice Focus Group Interview Results and Lessons from Ecojustice Group

On the day of the interview, we all arrived on time. The participants of the Ecojustice focus group interview were eight women and five men. The age range was forty-one years and above.

Table 4: The distribution of participants by church group in quantity of persons:

Ecojustice Church	Participants
United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa-Encarnación, Peñuelas, Puerto Rico	4
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales, Arecibo, Puerto Rico	3
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Espinosa, Dorado, Puerto Rico	4
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, Puerto Rico	2

The majority of the participants, 42.9 %, has been in their church more than 51 years. The demographic part, d, e, and f, of the questionnaire includes this information:

Figure 3: How many years have you been in your congregation?

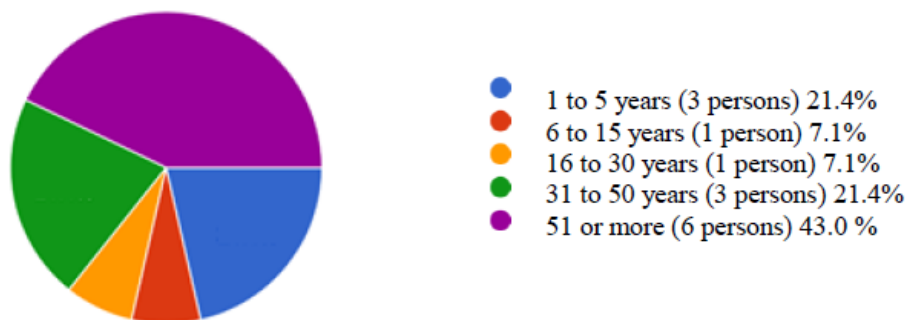


Figure 4: Do you live near your congregation?

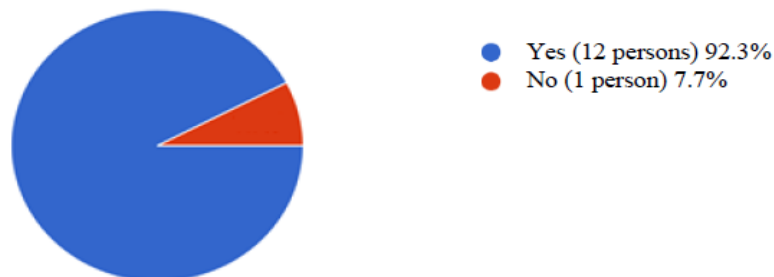
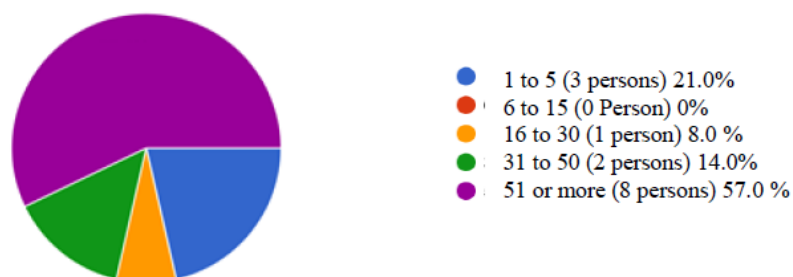


Figure 5: If you answered yes to the last question, please tell us how many years you have lived in the church's town.



The majority of the ecojustice leaders not only have been in their congregations for many years but are also living in the communities that surround the church for a long time. Two of the participants are active pastors in charge of a congregation. One is a pastor without a congregation but contributing to the congregation in which she serves. The Ecojustice group has three pastors and ten lay leaders. Pastoral leadership was a concept repeated several times in the interview affirming the importance of this role in the ecojustice efforts inside the church.

The Ecojustice focus group interview notes, questionnaires, and video recordings provide a rich variety of information shared in a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. I used a table grid for the interview data from the questions provided in the questionnaire. The model used for this table was included in the Appendix. This grid was helpful to observe and make comparisons about the common and different approaches that each church took regarding their own ecojustice situation. I identified fifteen topics mentioned very often and began to code by color. The topics are Pastoral and Lay Leadership, Ecotheological Interpretations, Church and Community Engagement, Empathy, Stewardship, Accountability, Spiritual Practices, Health Issues, Next Generation (Children and Youth), Big Economic Interests, Advocacy, Collective Pastoral Care, Ecosystem Pollution Worries, Accompanying and Achievements (Victory). From this list I identified the first 10 codes that the participants mentioned more in the interview by the ecojustice leaders. (The number one code is the one that the participants mentioned most. The number 10 code was the least mentioned:

1. Ecotheological Interpretations
2. Spiritual Practices
3. Church and Community Engagement
4. Pastoral and Lay Leadership
5. Advocacy
6. Accompanying
7. Ecosystem Pollution Worries
8. Health issues
9. Big Economic Interests

10. Collective Pastoral Care

These categories represent the themes from the answers that the ecojustice group participants gave during the interview. I will share some quotes related to the first five categories and other quotes that I consider are significant to highlight. The participants' involvement and body language demonstrated that they were interested in knowing about other congregations' experiences in their ecojustice struggles.

At the beginning, I observed that they were attentive and also at the same time revising their own answers to the questions, but as the group dynamic flowed, they engaged with each other in a respectful way and waited their turns for talking. In the first question, Espinosa, Dorado, interacted with one fact that Arecibo was sharing about an industry that contaminates both places. These two churches are located in the northern part of the island. Ecojustice Leaders C and H coincided on the pollution generated by General Electric in the ground water wells near their communities. Another aspect in which they coincided was in the difficulties of facing the big economic interests; in this topic the ecojustice leaders of the four churches were sharing the incredible difference between their resources and the multibillionaire industries that were contaminating their communities. Hato Nuevo's leaders shared that their constant struggle was compared with the David and Goliath struggle in Scripture, then Espinosa, Dorado, said that the community told the ecojustice leaders at the beginning of the ecojustice efforts about a similar comparison between David and Goliath. This Biblical story was discussed at the beginning of the conversation.

Some of the participants were taking notes about the ecostories of other congregations. When one of the Ecojustice Leader K from Peñuelas told about being motivated to participate in the ecojustice struggles was because he was born on the lands that the government expropriated to be the CORCO site, the group was very attentive. The government relocated the Ecojustice Leader's K family and other families to another place in bad conditions; they could not sleep at night when the refinery turned on the chimneys. This surprised even me, the researcher, because one of the government documents gave the data about the place chosen for the CORCO as a clear and abandoned place. The CORCO Pamphlet in 1965 related the story of the site: Fields of cane dotted the plain here and there, and a few small houses were scattered along the edge of the hills, but most of the area was overrun by scrub vegetation.²¹⁷ The living experience of this leader and resident for many years in that place told us another story. Ecojustice Leader K told us that two of his brothers had died from cancer, and that he is a cancer patient survivor. This leader shared from his heart his intimate family story to all of us. We were so moved to hear his brave affirmation as a Christian and neighbor to continue caring for the environment. He had also been arrested in Peñuelas with other ecojustice leaders because of their struggle against the ash deposit in Peñuelas. Also, when Peñuelas ecojustice leaders shared their cancer, respiratory, and skin illness related to the pollution in their community, other ecojustice leaders were empathic with them.

During the focus group interview, Ecojustice leaders from Espinosa, Dorado, said that the community had faith in the church. Arecibo ecojustice leaders affirmed this statement. The

²¹⁷ *Esto es CORCO: A Story of Puerto Rico's New Industrial Frontier*, 1965, Documento Archivo General de Puerto Rico. Sala de Estudio y Referencia Pedido de Documentos Fondo: PRIDCO, Serie: Promoción Industrial II, Cajas: 21 provincial, May 3, 2019.

dynamic was so affirmative between all churches, you could perceive a high level of understanding between all the participants. There was another moment in which one of the ecojustice leaders of Hato Nuevo shared that her children and younger generations from the church in Hato Nuevo are environmentalists today, because they had a model in their home church. The younger generation had an active role in the struggle for ecojustice in Hato Nuevo.

Arecibo shared an experience in which one of the ecojustice leaders in a Facebook live stream took a stand and demanded to Arecibo's mayor to get involved in their fight against the incinerator, and she described it such a manner that everyone in the room laughed in a supportive and understanding manner because of the braveness of this leader. Peñuelas highlighted another curious detail; the group of the elderly people of the church decided to make a vegetable garden. This project of the vegetable garden was a challenge because the terrain in that area is sterile. The vegetable garden not only functioned but produced huge fruits and vegetables. The elderly people group were very grateful to God that in a land of sterile and dryness the earth produced good fruits on the Church's land. The other participants celebrated this with them. The level of connectedness in the group was strong, meanwhile they continued sharing experiences that for others were similar but new at the same time.

An important aspect that they, the ecojustice leaders, repeated was how the community outside the church expected the active participation of Christians in the ecojustice struggles in the community. Ecojustice Leader C said that Christians in ecojustice issues was a contrast decades ago with the majority of churches that did not believe that the church should be involved in this kind of controversies or situations. She said that many churches did not tolerate that their leaders were involved in environmental struggles; also, she stated that leaders that participated in

ecojustice issues were outlaws in the Church and the congregation put them aside. She shared that she was so glad because the Church had evolved in this area and is making advances in understanding the gospel message. On the other hand, she said that environmental groups expected the participation of religious leaders and asked them to use the clerical collar in public activities.

When the Peñuelas and Espinosa ecojustice leaders talked about how they dealt with resistance, both churches talked about the wisdom with which they relied upon to handle the resistance that emerged in the church in the midst of the environmental struggles of the community. The Espinosa church shared that people of their congregation worked in the concrete plant and minimized the health effects for people living nearby. They told us that with Christian education, especially stewardship series lessons from the denomination, scientific orientation, comprehension, and love, the resistance diminished, and the church embraced the community's struggle as their own struggle. Peñuelas shared that they had an experience dealing with opposition to ecojustice efforts because of the theological conceptions of some in the congregation, but with Christian education, scientific information, and visitation they managed the resistance. The Pastor and leaders visited members that left the church. The majority returned to the church. The board of the church managed it with wisdom and love. Espinosa, Dorado and Tallaboa, Peñuelas, shared a similar pattern to deal with resistance to ecojustice efforts inside the church that we will see in more detail in the evaluation chapter.

Ecojustice leaders in Peñuelas shared that one of them had the opportunity to take their claim for ecojustice to Virginia and the Congress in Washington with 11 other environmental groups from Puerto Rico. The ecojustice leaders of other churches were impressed and happy to

hear of that achievement. Also, there was a moment when everyone in the room laughed, which occurred because Peñuelas shared that in a Public Hearing in the offices of the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER), they poured a sample of ashes onto the table, because the DNER said that the ashes were not toxic, and the deposit would continue in Peñuelas. The fact is that when the ashes were poured on the table, the public hearing was canceled and the DNER employees with protection gear cleaned the ashes. The main television broadcast news reported the story. Everyone remembered that; we laughed all together. The experience of hearing their stories was an emotional process for all and for me as a researcher.

Hato Nuevo shared another interesting experience. The ocular visit to the proposed site (Finca Elena) for the Regional Landfill in Hato Nuevo would be in the morning. The different agencies in charge of giving the permit to the BFI went to Finca Elena; also, the neighbors, people from church and representatives of the company, were there. Ecojustice Leader B explained that the company and some government agencies were affirming that in the place there was not much fauna, that they haven't heard the coqui (native frog from PR that sings at night) in three months doing studies there. God sent in that same moment an intense rain; the water streams flooded the area and at 9 am the coqui sang. Everyone from the government agencies understood the critical ecological site would become a disaster if they approved that permit. God sent the rain at the perfect time. The coqui song was a blessing and an anticipation to victory in this ecojustice struggle.

The ecojustice leaders described interesting strategies to accompanying the community. Espinosa, for example, visited the people who were affected and heard and talked to them before developing strategies for accompanying the community. Peñuelas visited ill people in the

community with cancer and respiratory problems and prayed for them. Hato Nuevo sent a Christmas card to the agencies in charge of giving permit to the BFI. The card has an aerial photo of Finca Elena, the site proposed for the Regional Landfill. Inside the card a poem alluding to the ecological and natural importance of this site for the community and the water of the metropolitan area. In a board meeting, Arecibo approved the complete participation of the church in the struggle against the proposal of an incinerator in their community.

At the end of the meeting, one of the Ecojustice leaders from Peñuelas talked about the experience that Ecojustice Leader J had in Jerusalem when she traveled there. She used a shirt that says, "Do not deposit more Ashes in Peñuelas" and she proceeded to put a petition in the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The ecojustice efforts transcended frontiers. The particular space in which they could share their experiences in ecojustice struggles were an opportunity that in our Puerto Rican church context is not so common. One of the ecojustice leaders from Espinosa expressed at the end that for him the experience was so valuable and like no other before in his life in church and expressed his gratitude.

There are a lot of important quotes that will be in this project from the ecojustice leaders. I want to highlight here some quotes that echo in my mind and that connected with my call to care for creation: "Ecojustice Leader F: "Late justice, is not justice, it is injustice." Ecojustice Leader F: "We cannot lose our capacity to feel indignation." Ecojustice leader F: "Jesus teach me that when there is injustice and abuse, we have to take it out." Ecojustice Leader I: "We cannot fail, we have God working with us in this project and He will not fail." Ecojustice Leader C: "We have to care for creation, use resources wisely, being accountable to God for whatever happens to our neighbors." There are many more important statements from these brave

ecojustice leaders that we will consider in the evaluation chapter, especially the ecotheological interpretations, pastoral and lay leadership, spiritual practices, church and community engagement and advocacy strategies. The collaboration between these ecojustice churches for the development of this project has been the ideological and theological platform on which the Toa Alta congregation will consider and reflect for their own ecotheological reflections.

At the end of the interview, as the researcher, I expressed my gratitude and explained that all the wisdom and stories that they had shared during the interview will be in a four Biblical-lesson series on Ecojustice presented to the Toa Alta Congregation. We prayed and shared lunch together. This was an amazing and valuable learning experience for me as a researcher.

Lessons for Toa Alta

The Lesson Series: *Ecojustice Challenges for the Church* presents us the realities in the struggle of Puerto Rico's communities for ecojustice. As soon as I could revise the questionnaires and the focus group interview videos and notes, I proceeded to prepare the four lessons. The series shows how these churches had accompanied their communities against the companies that represent giants' pollutants that oppress people's and nature's health. The well-known biblical story of David and Goliath is the core of these lessons. The Hebrew Bible in 1 Samuel 17 talks about the uneven confrontation between David and the Philistine's army including Goliath, the giant. The battle between David and Goliath reveals the power of God and the victory of justice through the faith that makes a significant difference. The uneven struggles with the giants, that symbolize powerful industries, and churches, united with their communities, fighting with faith and hope in God against injustices are the focus of these ecostories. The constructive theory of education for adults from Dr. Jane Vella was one of the educative theories used in the

elaboration of these four lessons. The lesson structure is similar to the one used in the Biblical Sunday Lessons of *El Discípulo* guide. The four lesson Series in Ecojustice are the following:

- I. Lesson Distribution:
 - a. Lesson 1: The Great Challenge in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo (1 Samuel 17:1-16)
 - b. Lesson 2: Accompanying in Justice for the Great Challenges in Tallaboa, Peñuelas (1 Samuel 17:17-30)
 - c. Lesson 3: Fighting for Justice in the Great Challenges in Espinosa, Dorado (1 Samuel 17:31-39)
 - d. Lesson 4: Overcoming the Giant in Garrochales, Arecibo (1 Samuel 17:40-50)

The study lesson series describes each congregation's support for the community in eco-justice challenges. All four lessons are in the Appendix. Toa Alta's congregation, through the study lesson series described above, received exposure to these ecostories. The Toa Alta congregation would be immersed in the experiences of collaborative learning between the four churches.

The Toa Alta congregation's participation followed a similar order as the other four congregations. I asked permission, through a letter, to the board of the church to participate in the investigation. All members of the board agreed, except for two members that chose to abstain from voting. I began with a brief orientation to the whole congregation on a Sunday morning service. I gave a letter that describes the project and the process in the Toa Alta congregation to all the members of the church who were eighteen years or older. The next Sunday, I put the flyer inviting the members to participate in the research on the Bulletin Board. The following Sunday we began to give and then collect the Consent form, giving the church's members time to read and decide if they would participate. People especially the ones under eighteen years helped me

to distribute and collect the Consent Form. The process for collecting the consent form took two Sundays. A considerable number of people, 55, decided to participate.

The study Lesson Series on Ecojustice began the fourth Sunday. Before the first lesson began, I gave the Toa Alta Group Questionnaire (Pre-questionnaire) to the ones that consented to participate and were present that first Sunday. The experience was enlightening for me and a surprise because of the interest the participants showed during the lessons. The experience included some dynamics in which they could talk about the other churches' experiences and reflected on our own environmental challenges present in the Toa Alta community. I completed the four-lesson series the fourth Sunday, then we gave the same Toa Alta Group Questionnaire (Post-questionnaire) to the ones who consented to participate and were present. The youth that did not participate because of the age limit of eighteen or older helped me in the administration of the questionnaire and the collection of it.

Toa Alta Congregation Lesson Series on Ecojustice Results

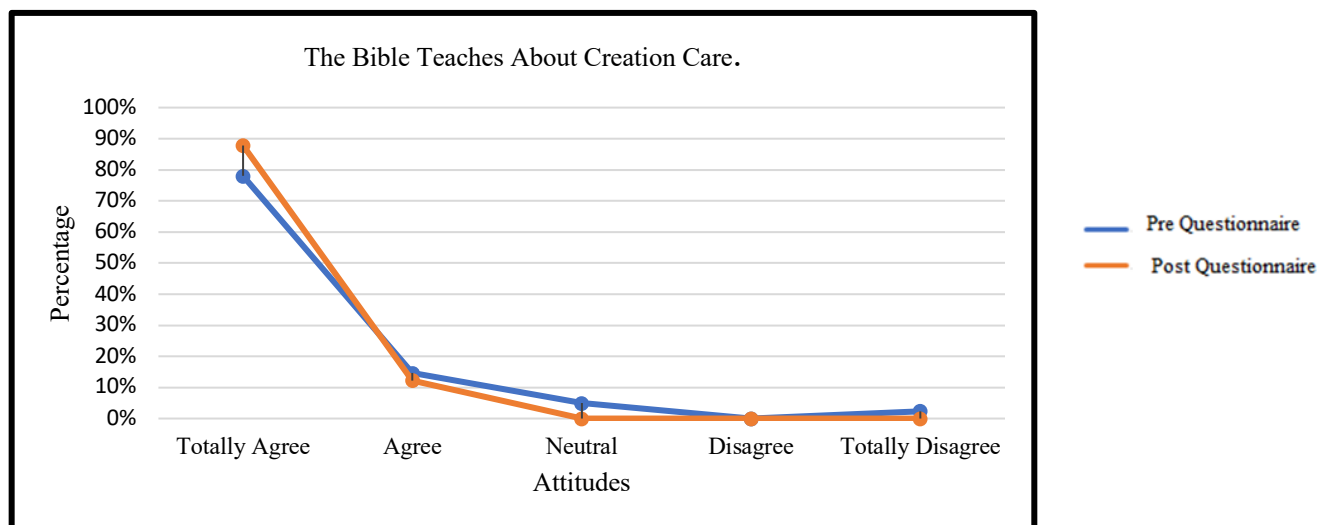
Pre and Post Questionnaire Results

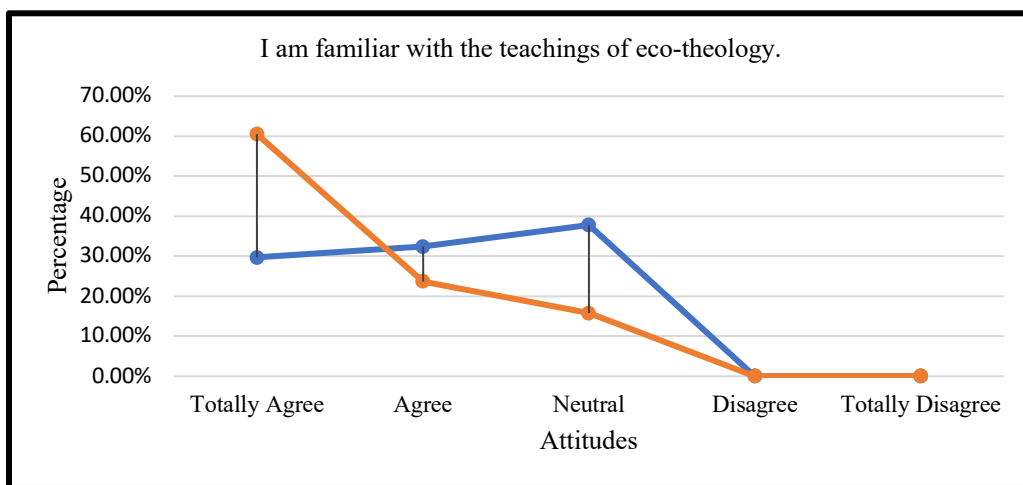
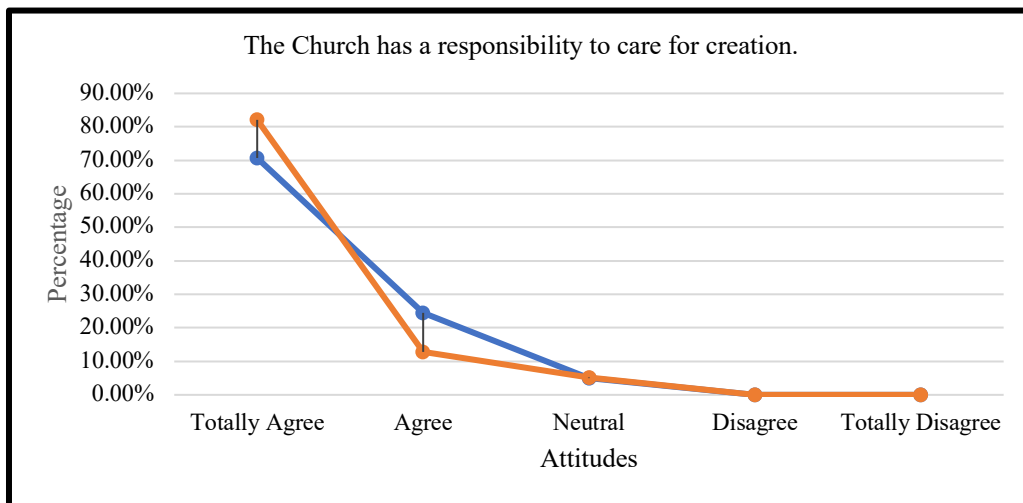
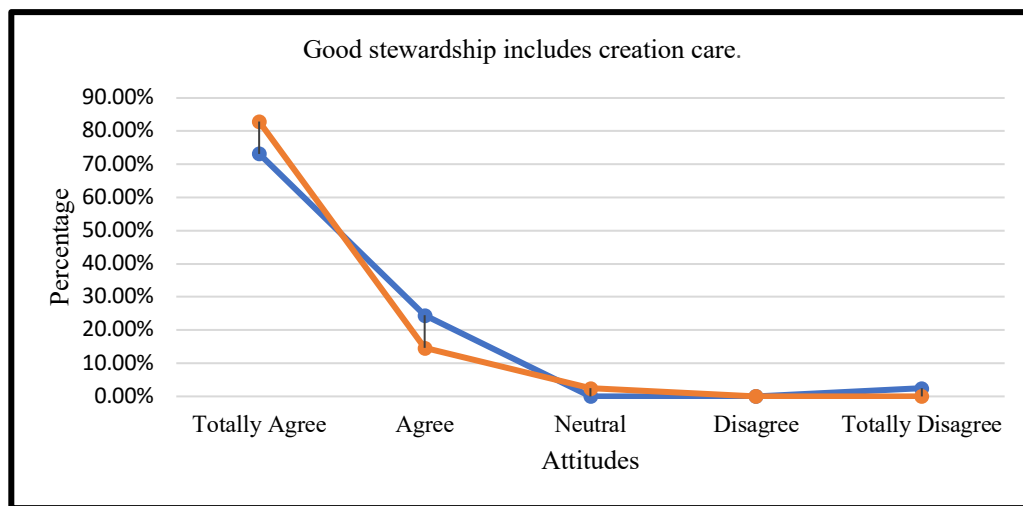
The demographic composition of the participants from the Toa Alta congregation that filled the questionnaires before and after the Lesson Series in Ecojustice are practically the same. The age range of the 50% of the participants were of 61 years or more, 19% from 51-60 years, 17 % from 41-50 years, 9 % from 18-30 years, and 5% from 31-40 years. The majority of the participants are above 51 years, as the demographic of the church and Puerto Rico is increasing the elderly people in all sectors of the island's society. The majority of the participants were females (64 %) and males (36%). More women participated in this study. The years that the participants had been in the Toa Alta congregation are more varied: 32% have been 1-5 years, 29% from 6 to 15

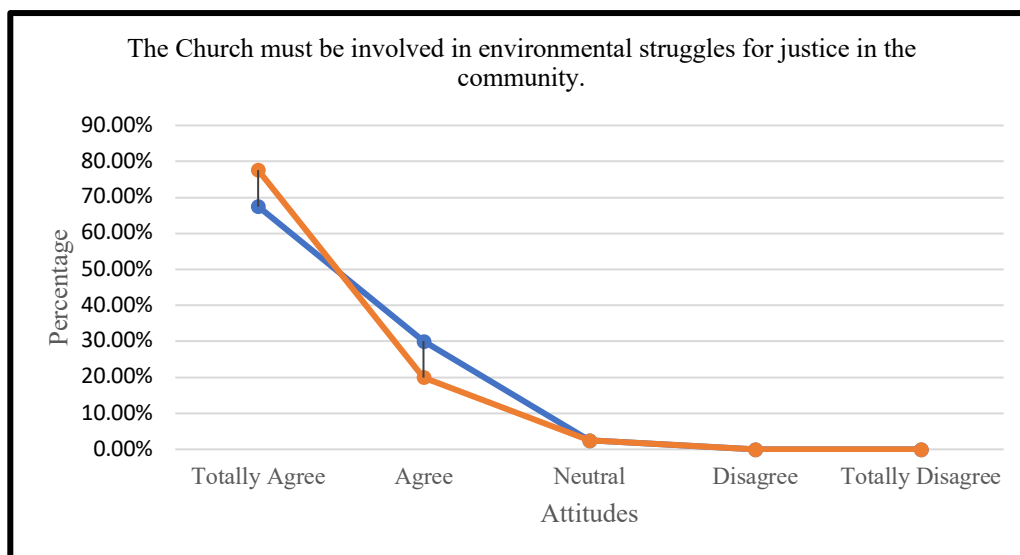
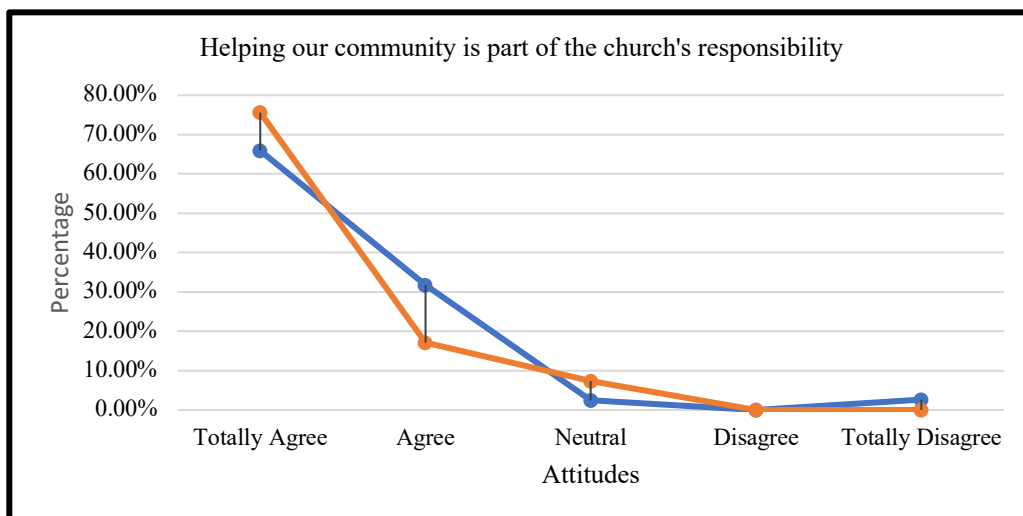
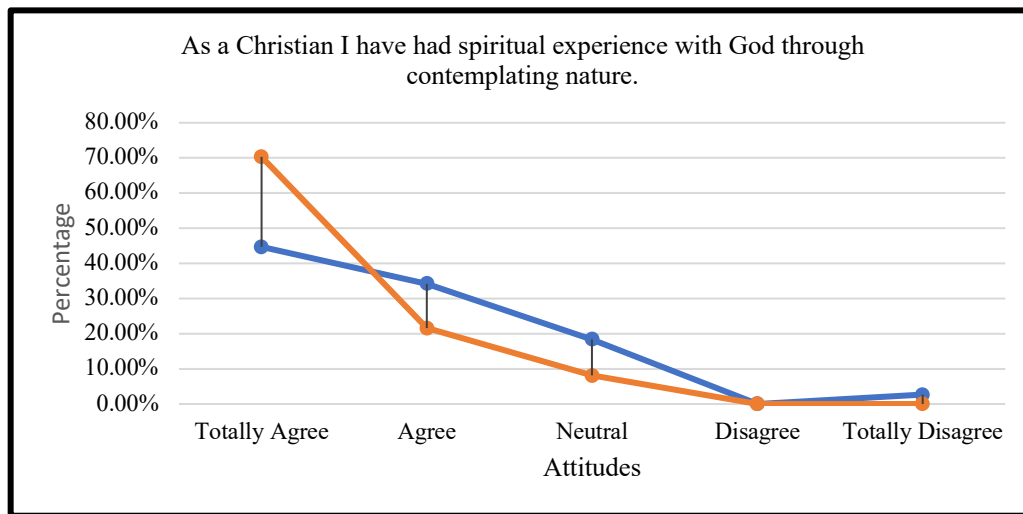
years, 22 % from 16-30 years, 10 % 51 years or more, and 7% from 31 to 51 years. The majority of the participants, 69% lived in Toa Alta town. The fact of living in Toa Alta town could mean that the participants could be aware or were directly affected with the environmental problems in Toa Alta. From the group of participants who live in Toa Alta a 52 % had lived there 51 or more years, 21% from 31-50 years, 10 % from 16-30 years, 14 % from 6-15 years, and 3% from 1-5 years. This data means that the 83% of the participants had lived in Toa Alta more than 16 years.

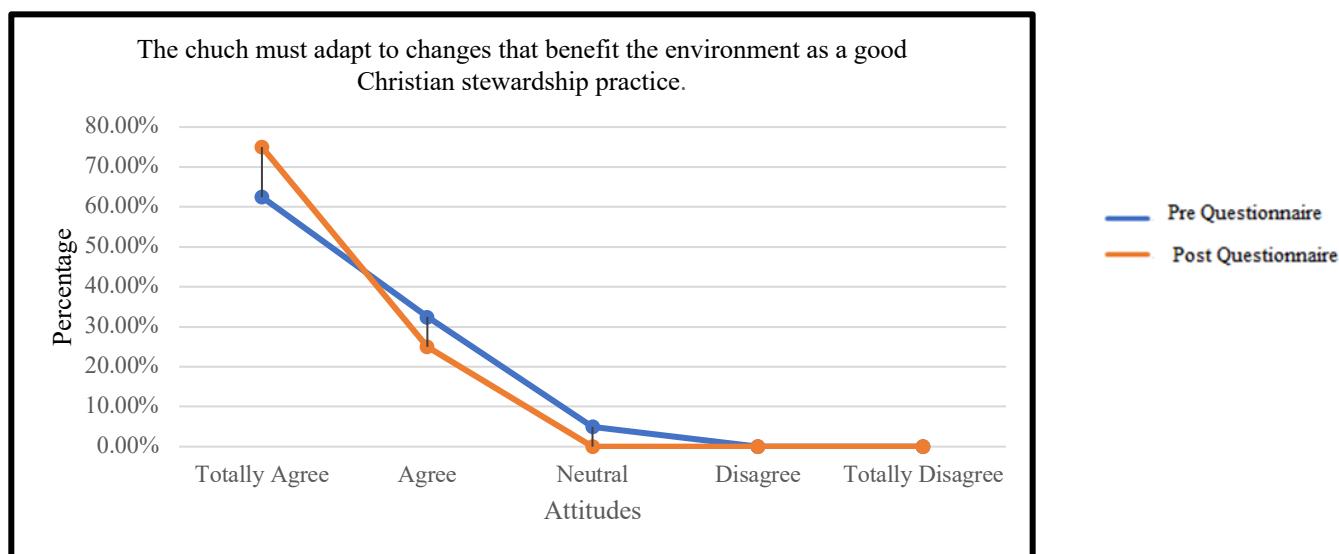
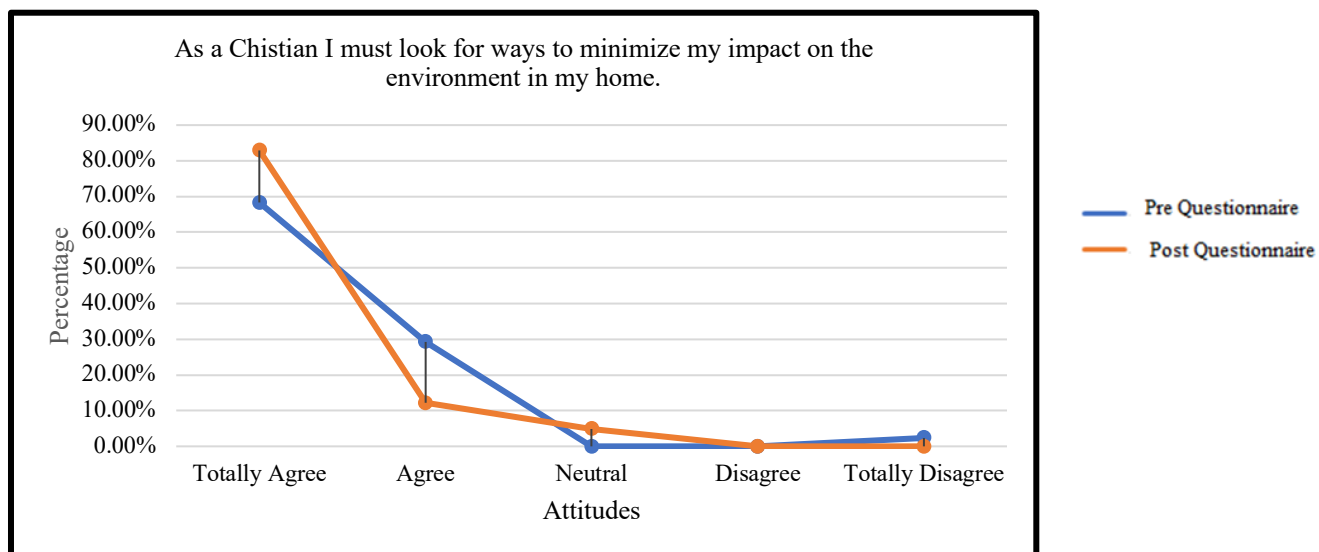
The second part asked to select the best description of the participants' attitudes toward a specific statement related to ecotheology and ecojustice. Here we present the data collected from the pre- and post-questionnaires compared in several graphs, one for each statement. The colors that represent each questionnaire are blue for Prequestionnaire and orange for Postquestionnaire.

Graphics Representing the Participant's Attitudes Toward Each Statement in the Pre and Post Questionnaires.
Note: Blue= Prequestionnaire / Orange=Postquestionnaire









The significance of these answers are that considering the conservative context of the congregation, they accepted the possibility of changing their minds on some issues related with ecotheology, ecojustice, and the role of church in the current environmental challenges. This part of the questionnaire makes me reflect on the many forms of knowledge we have but do not categorize it as the main current of knowledge. The congregations have their biblical knowledge

as a foundation to understand ecotheology and ecojustice in a broader perspective through the classes.

The third part of the pre and post questionnaire was a series of six questions. The data collected in this part is presented in the following table considering the most repeated concepts that the participants mentioned and the most interesting concepts that captured my attention as a researcher.

Table 5: Answers for the Third Part of Pre and Post Toa Alta Congregation Questionnaires

Note: Numbers reflect the number of times a phrase or word was repeated. No number assigned means that it was mentioned only once.

Question	Pre-Questionnaire	Post-Questionnaire
a. What does the Bible says about creation care?	15 We have to take care of creation. 6 We have to be good stewards. 2 We have to be administrators of creation. God has given us creation to sustain us and we must take care of it. God entrusted Earth to human being. Subjugate it. Give a responsible maintenance. We are responsible. Exodus 19:56 and Leviticus 25:23. God created heavens and Earth. Help your neighbor as yourself.	24 Take care of creation. 6 Good stewards. 4 Good administrators. 4 God gave authority to humans to care for all that had been created. The planet is our home we must protect it. Live in harmony with nature. Cultivate it. Adam was in charge of everything. We are in charge of creation. Creation as a gift and a blessing. Conserve and protect it. God made the heavens and the Earth. Genesis 1:20 and Genesis 2:25.
b. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “eco-theology”?	11 Environment 8 Biblical study of ecology. 7 Taking care of the environment. 7 God’s creation 7 God and nature 6 Nature 3 Ecology 3 Christian perspective of faith. 2 Search for the wellbeing of nature and human. 2 Earth or planet	11 Taking care 10 Biblical 10 Environment 8 Creation 8 Christian perspective of faith. 7 Nature and Ecosystem 4 Earth, planet or ground 3 Theology in conversation with Faith. 3 Ecology 3 Justice Evangelism Justification by faith. Stewards Guidance
c. What does the term “eco-justice” mean to you?	9 Justice 8 Nature 8 Environment	13 Justice 12 Environment 9 Justice for creation.

	<p>6 Justice for the environment (nature, ecology, earth, creation). 5 Human beings 4 Creation 4 Well being 3 Advocate 3 Taking care 3 Earth Environmental Justice</p>	<p>6 Nature/ Ecosystem 6 Creation 4 Human being 4 Taking care. 4 Legal or law 3 Ecological 3 Well being 2 Biblical 2 Advocate Ecological Justice. Justice for the poor. Environment to be pure and healthy. Social level income Peaceful manifestations The communities</p>
<p>d. Can you mention the environmental problems that you know exist in Toa Alta?</p>	<p>16 Landfill 17 Asphalt Plant 6 Blank Others mentioned by them: Animal farms Burning garbage Rivers Environmental pollution Air pollution Communities without sewage. Toxic emanations Thank God everything is fine.</p>	<p>21 Landfill 25 Asphalt Plant 5 Blank Others mentioned by them: Sewer affecting rivers and underground water. Gases No recycling Toxic odors affecting schools. Concrete Plant Chemical pollution of the environment. Water pollution in wells and rivers. Incinerating or burning in the landfill. Coal ash Used oils Quarry</p>
<p>e. Do you know about other churches' advocacy efforts for ecojustice for the community?</p>	<p>7 Yes 16 No 4 I do not know 11 Blank Answers: CCDC Hato Nuevo CCDC Arecibo CCDC Espinosa Meeting with the community and the government for advocating for the environment. Various Disciples of Christ churches. Yes, the pastor and other pastors from other denominations. Some churches that had gone to the public square and marches. I know that some practice it, but I do not know the answers.</p>	<p>5 Yes 4 No 0 I do not know. 9 Blank 14 CCDC Hato Nuevo 4 EUC Peñuelas 12 Espinosa 13 Arecibo Others: 6 Vega Alta Vieques Another Disciples Churches CCDC Palos Blancos, Corozal 3 Toa Alta</p>
<p>f. Can you envision any form of support from our church for the ecojustice</p>	<p>2 Yes 15 Blank I do not know 7 Recycling 6 Educating</p>	<p>4 Yes 5 Blank 0 I do not know 11 Marches 10 Prayer</p>

<p>challenges that face Toa Alta?</p>	<p>4 Praying and Vigils 10 Participating in advocacy activities in the community. 3 Raise awareness in the congregation. Bringing support from our church to attend the climate challenges and environmental. Justice because a lack of care in these issues. Not using chemicals that harm the environment. Buy paper plates and cups. No cutting trees. Solar panels</p>	<p>7 Educating the congregation and the community/ Conferences. 6 Recycling 4 Meetings 4 Support other towns struggling with environmental problems. 4 Fasting 4 Unity 3 Open church's facilities. 3 Prayer services and vigils Brochure and Newsletter. Perseverance Courage Believe that God is with us. Sowing Do not cut trees. Compost Fundraising Caring for the earth. Make a committee Social media Government public hearings Do not use chemicals that harm the environment. Human resources (lawyers/environmentalists) Create support groups so they know they can count on the church. Minimizing the solid waste. The church can invest in developing a community recycling plan. Create awareness in the community through newspaper.</p>
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Observing the pre- and post-questionnaires answers I noticed that after the classes the participants wrote more answers and include more theological concepts like ecojustice and evangelism as an example in question b. After the classes more participants identified the environmental problems that affect Toa Alta. Guebara refers to the process of rethinking our knowledge and letting the people observe and rethink their surroundings. Also, after the classes in the post questionnaire, participants mentioned more strategies as advocacy efforts that churches involved in ecojustice practiced. I can observe that they were opened to learn, and they demonstrated it in the change before and after the classes. In each one of the classes I included

exercises to collect additional data that the participants learned during the classes. The data collected in the class exercises and the observations made in each one of them are presented in the following section.

Observations and Commentaries from Each Class of the Lesson Series on Ecojustice

The Toa Alta's congregation attendance that morning was 75 people and 45 filled out the questionnaire 30 were underage, and some decided to observe. The people participated and talked about what impacted them in an exercise at the end of the class. The participants mentioned several observations including:

From the beginning, they were counting on God, the story of the “Coqui”, unity, God gave them the triumph, children participation, the church must support environmental causes and open its facilities, the church went to government agencies, the church did not get cowardly, they stood with God and overcame the giant, old people got involved for the next generations, we can do the same here with the Asphalt Plant issue in Bo. Piñas through unity and prayer.²¹⁸

Of all the above, the participants repeated most the participation of children in the process, unity between church and community, and prayer combined with action. To my surprise, one of the ladies affirmed that we in Toa Alta can do the same with the Asphalt Plant issue. I expected a comment like that at the end of the fourth-class session, but this person surprised me in the first class. When we shared the story of the “Coqui” some of the participants reacted praising God. And Glory to God! One of the leaders highlighted the comparison between David and Goliath's

²¹⁸ Commentaries from the participants in the Lesson Series on EcoJustice, Ecostories of Hato Nuevo, 2019.

story with this ecostory and he said that he liked the comparison.²¹⁹ At the end of the class they applauded. I interpreted this as a sign of a positive reaction to the experience.

The participants in Peñuelas' class were very attentive. When we talked about the concepts that they learned from the class they mentioned the concepts while one person wrote them on the board. The concepts that they remembered at the end of the class were: The way in which they managed the resistance, prayer and intercession; leaders that intercede and calm the people: unity; perseverance, faith, prayer, and action; fearlessness, solidarity, diligent action, fasting and prayer was powerful and effective, the church brought the conciliatory peace.²²⁰ When we talked about the resistance inside the church in Peñuelas, the participants paid attention to hear how the church managed the struggle related to the ash problem within the congregation.

Dorado's ecostory was familiar to Toa Alta church members. One of the members of the church in Toa Alta had part of her family in the Espinosa community. She nodded with her head each time we shared facts related to health issues in the community caused by environmental problems. After class, she told me that two members of her family had died from cancer. I did not know that, and this made me reflect on the fact that people are more than a statistic; they are family, beloved ones affected by this contamination. Another participant mentioned that we have to promote solidarity with the less favored people. We need to have an ethical concern. This commentary resonates with Boff's ecotheology and liberation theology in dealing with the most

²¹⁹ *Video of Lesson Series on Ecojustice Ecostory of Hato Nuevo*. 2019.

²²⁰ *Exercise in the Lesson Series on Ecojustice, Ecostory of Peñuelas*. 2019.

vulnerable people with the ethics of care that Boff emphasizes. Other participants highlighted the organization that ecojustice leaders had; others said, “They saved people’s health.”

I invited the participants to write the strategies Espinosa’s Church used to cope with the environmental problem in their community. From all the index cards that they gave we observed the most repeated ones. The strategies that the groups considered more significant in order of most mentioned were: Vigils and prayers, organization, unity between church and community, search for information, conferences, workshops, education, counting with God first, a women that accepted Christ, perseverance, faith, peaceful protests, working with love for workers and the resources, journalists and newspaper, church managed the situation of resistance from workers of the Concrete Plant that were members of the church, telephone directory, communitarian closet, planting 500 trees, fasting, t shirts, public hearings, use of wisdom, unity between the two municipalities of Dorado and Vega Alta, and environmental studies. In all, the groups in the class mentioned 63 strategies, some of them were repeated.

During the class we had an emotional moment when I shared that the ecojustice leaders received the Chelonian Award from the Metropolitan University and many people got teary eyes wet including me, the researcher. I shared that the ecojustice leaders from Espinosa were glad in sharing what God had done through them in their environmental struggle. At the end, significant moment was when I shared the Sara Peisch testimony who died from cancer surrounded by the ecojustice leaders of the CCDOCE. The ecojustice leaders in Espinosa sang, prayed, and gave spiritual support in her final battle against cancer. Sharing this story was a very emotional moment in this class.

The majority were very attentive in the Arecibo's lesson and participated, even the ones that had not filled the questionnaire. In the congregation, a few members were indifferent, but very respectful. They were surprised because of the many environmental problems that Arecibo had confronted through the years, especially the ground contamination and how that affected and limited the capacity for agriculture in the area. The participants shared many ideas like: Take the asphalt plant contamination issue to an international level. We have to deal with the landfill situation because the objectionable odors penetrate people's houses. Create a committee in church that works with the environmental problems in the community and inform progress to the church. More recycling and less garbage in our families. Ask that the municipality open a recycling program. We did an exercise and divided the participants in eleven groups of four persons each. They had to choose an environmental problem in Toa Alta and mention one strategy that can be used in that particular problem. The results of this exercise are in the table below.

Table 6: Strategies mentioned in the last class of the Ecojustice Lesson Series

Group	Problem	Strategy
1	Landfill	Closing it. Prepare a brochure describing how the Landfill affects the community. Prepare a project of how we can recycle for the community.
2	Asphalt Plant and the School	Marches outside Toa Alta to create awareness.
3	Asphalt Plant	Marches, peaceful protests, use the communication media and learn more about the problem.
4	Landfill	Help to increase awareness beginning in our families, not buying plastic; recycling, reusing. See the problem on a bigger scale to help the community. Ask that the Toa Alta municipality begin recycling.
5	None in particular.	Praying is the best strategy.
6	Landfill	Unite efforts with other churches and the government. Organize the people that live near the Landfill, because they are more affected in their health. Contact health authorities. Look for litigation in this situation.
7	None in particular.	Support through conferences, support the marches, because united we are stronger. Present these problems in the social media.

8	Asphalt Plant affecting the community and the school	Create a committee with various church's members that can work with the ecosystem issues and receive information from the community. At the same time, this committee can search for alternatives to the problems and present these alternatives to the church for church support and then to the community for community support.
9	Asphalt Plant	Education. Health. Wisdom to create awareness. Do not throw garbage.
10	Asphalt Plant	How can we confront the environmental problems?
11	Abandoned houses, some used by addicts and garbage that brings contamination.	Ask that the senators and representatives' laws for this situation. The government or the owners must do something because there are many people in need of a house.

Some of the groups do not mention the specific problems and gave suggestions on how to deal with environmental problems in the community. At the end of the class one of the church's leaders gave thanks to God and to us for bringing these classes because the classes made him see the environmental issues not in a trivial way but invited him to take action. We have learned that we have to take more action. All that we can do, it does not matter if is little, but take action and continue to spread this message to our families even when they cannot receive the message as we have here, little by little we can do more.²²¹ These participants approved the process and the presentation of the classes. All of them applauded. I finished the class praying and then I gave the post questionnaire and they filled it out after the class. These four Sundays had been a challenge and an opportunity to share the ecostories from the four churches active in ecojustice.

Toa Alta Focus Group Interview Results

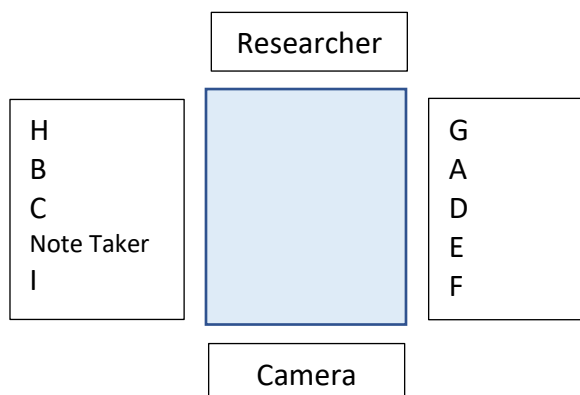
The results of the Toa Alta survey and the focus groups interviews will be presented in this part. The first focus group in Toa Alta was held on October 17, 2019, from 9 a.m. to 12 m.d. and

²²¹ Video form the Lesson Series Classes on Ecojustice, Ecostory of Arecibo.

attended to the event nine persons. The second focus group in Toa Alta was held on October 18, 2019, from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and fifteen people attended the event. The two focus group interviews were recorded on video and one person helped me to take notes from the conversation in each interview. A total of twenty-four people attended the focus groups meetings. A person assisted me in receiving each participant and guiding them to write their name in a confidential list that would identify their commentaries and questionnaires with a specific letter (A, B, C...). I will refer to their commentaries as Participant A, B, C... each letter corresponding to that person. Before we began, we prayed and then read a series of rules for the interview. Before we started the conversation, I gave the other questionnaire designed for this focus group interview with Toa Alta. The questions in this document guided the conversation. Before we began the conversation, I gave time for them to write their answers. The experience was amazing for me when I heard conversations with the Toa Alta group members. For example, one participant expressed that he learned what is ecojustice, a term that they never had heard before. Another participant said that she never thought the church had a responsibility with the community regarding environmental problems and another affirmed that the eco-stories of other churches made her feel empowered. "We can achieve more than we think, if we unite and seek justice with God's help." The insights, concepts, ideas, and knowledge that emerged from this matrix of rethinking the reality and context of ecojustice in Toa Alta was captured in these significant and deep conversations.

Observations of the Toa Alta Focus Group AM

All participants arrived on time. The following diagram shows how the participants sat in the focus group interview.



The following tables includes the demographic data of the Toa Alta AM Focus Group:

Table 7: Toa Alta AM Focus Group Age Range

Age Range	To what age range you belong (person)	%
0 to 17	0	0
18 to 30	0	0
31 to 40	0	0
41 to 50	1	11.1
51 to 60	1	11.1
61 or more	7	77.8

Table 8: Gender Toa Alta AM

Male	Female
33.3% (3 person)	66.7% (6persons)

Table 9: Years belonging to the Congregation and Years Living in Toa Alta (AM Group)

Age Range	How many years you have been in the Toa Alta congregation? (person)	Percent %	How many years you have living in Toa Alta?	Percent %
1 to 5	1	111.1	1	14.3
6 to 15	4	44.5	1	14.3
16 to 30	2	22.2	0	0.0
31 to 50	0	0	1	14.3
51 or more	2	22.2	4	57.1

In the beginning of the conversation, they were focused on giving the answers they had written, but later they began to share their insights, stories, and experiences from their memories of the past in Puerto Rico. They remembered and shared that in the past there was less garbage in Puerto Rico. The majority of participants in this meeting were born before the industrial revolution of Puerto Rico, before the 1950's. They seemed concerned about the environmental

irresponsibility of humans and the degradation of nature. I observed that they were concentrated and focused on the conversation and the process. Health concern was present in their answers. Many participated in answering the questions; almost a range of 5 or 6 participants for each question. On other occasions, they applied the Biblical story of David and Goliath as we shared in the Series Lesson on Ecojustice. They were very impressed by the ecostories and the spiritual practices in the midst of environmental problems affecting the community. All affirmed the valuable contributions of all ecojustice churches in their efforts. Participant D highlighted that one of the stories that most impacted him was when the ecojustice leaders of the CCDOCE, Dorado, accompanied Sarah Peisch, an environmentalist, in her last days with cancer surrounded by them in prayer and songs. In other ways they preach without words, with love. Meanwhile they were in the marches with their testimony of love and brotherhood. They shared their faith with Sarah Peisch and the love and unity were strong.

The ecostory in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, impacted Participant I in the experience of the visual inspection of Finca Elena, the site proposed for the landfill, when in that visit the heavy rain that God sent demonstrated that this was not the appropriate place for that project. Participant E said that he admired all the churches, because they made efforts, fought in the battle and none of them gave up. They stood firm, Hato Nuevo captured my attention because they fought for the health but also for the Elena farm jobs (agriculture and cattle) and the water. Participant A shared that all churches inspired us to fight for the cause and be persistent in prayer, because prayer is the force for the fight. Participant F said, “We had to admire all of them because they were firm and focused in going forward and they triumphed;

because God was in the midst; because without prayer and fasting we can do nothing; God always guided us in everything.”

There was a moment in which Participant B spoke against doing marches and protests because some people get out of control. She “agreed with visiting people but was not very convinced of the protests and marches as advocacy actions”. All heard her with respect. Participant H said that for her, it was the contrary, because she thought that marches, and protests did not achieve anything and with the experiences of the ecostories she learned that these processes are very effective. This participant appreciated a positive effect in the struggle for the wellbeing of the environment. Participant A shared that she changed her mind about this, because previously she thought that churches did not have to be involved in this kind of issues but now, she understands that this is part of our responsibility as a church, and she believed in the peaceful manifestations. In the fourth question regarding what they have learned about ecotheology Participant E, a Bible teacher in the church, shared that even when he had studied theology it was the first time that he heard about ecotheology and he suggested that we should talk more about ecotheology and ecojustice in church and integrate it in the Bible Studies. “I had not known about this knowledge and in the studies, it was the first time I heard the word ecotheology.” In the conversation, I told him that ecotheology is a recent theology, but the theology of creation has been present a long time. He was interested in that we continue talking about with this topic in church. Participant E said, “I learned that ecotheology is useful to create awareness about helping the planet.” Participant B said that many times these environmental problems are because of the government and the community’s a lack of knowledge on these

topics. She thinks that we must inform the mayor and the community of these important ecological matters, so as not to repeat the same errors.

Another interesting contribution was from Participant E that highlights the struggle for ecojustice in our community. It is important to be alert and aware of every new project coming from companies that appear to harm the environment before it gets established; that is ecojustice. In this same topic about ecojustice Participant A said that we have to teach others to protect the environment and fight for the mission of protecting the duty of caring for the environment. When the group began talking about the landfill and the asphalt plant, they shared interesting insights. Participant E said that in the past each town had their landfill, and we did not have the problem of the biggest regional landfills as is the case of Toa Alta that receives solid waste from various towns. He expressed his idea that if each town had their own landfill and an efficient recycling program it would be better. The federal government had made the decisions to close landfills. He mentioned that the federal government had put hard restrictions to eliminate the swine and chicken farming to obligate us to consume products from the mainland. This can be seen as a systemic appraisal of reality. Some processes bring to mind to some extent the colonialism and lack of autonomy that Puerto Rico has in its decisions that affect the economy of the island. He provided a description of colonialism in daily life experience. It was very interesting that he highlighted this systemic view of the circumstances. Also, this participant mentioned that the Asphalt Plant is not shut down because it gives money to the municipality in taxes.

Participant F said that one of the reasons some people do not like the church is because we are the ones that denounce these issues related with the environment. We talk and stand to take action. This contribution resonates with the consequences of assuming the prophetic voice

of the church. Participant I said that we can correct what is contaminating the environment and we can generate less garbage. Participant B said that we can visit some agencies and have a representation of the church in the community committees, so the community can see church's practical actions in their problems. These classes had taught me so much and I think that can help the community also. This participant said, "I know a family that had to move because of the leachate that poured from the Toa Alta landfill." Participant A in question number eight regarding hope recited a poetic verse that she wrote: "We have to fight with hope and not desist. We must insist, resist, persist and not desist."

The participants were so glad to share what they had learned and gave some strategies that we as the church can do and they were willing to do it for the Landfill and environmental program. They suggested the union with the community be renewed and to ask the government for action in these environmental issues. They proposed marches, manifestations, prayer vigils, and newspaper contacts in nearby towns. Participant E said that we cannot let the issue go down and we have to keep the struggle. Participant I suggested recycling, buying biodegradable and compostable items making compost so that people can see the church on action in these issues. They shared several practical suggestions that can be done. There was a moment that Participant A talked about how unity strengthens us, and with faith and hope God changes things. Suddenly, they remembered an old Christian song and began to sing a part of it. This was a moment in which I perceived enthusiasm in the group.

Participant H affirmed that we have to do ecojustice with perseverance, putting God first and we have to be more aware to be able to hear what the Earth wants to tell us. We have to put into practice what we have heard in these classes. This comment about hearing what the earth

wants to tell us and putting into practice what we have heard in these classes resonates with Gebara's ecofeminism in terms of the connection that we must have with our mother earth and the actions that new knowledge can lead us to. Participant E shared that he learned that the studies he took were so good. "I am sure that many of us learned things that we did not know and have been made conscience about. My daughter told me that last Sunday she was in a place near the beach, and she saw a bag in the water, and she told me, "My heart broke and I felt pain in my heart". The connection between that experience and the classes that were given were significant for this family and he shared this with us. Participant E reaffirmed that these studies are good for the church and, "We must give this classes more often, also give the classes to the community and to the mayors." The participants openly talked about helping the municipal government in the environmental issues. Participant D connected the environmental issues, spirituality, and colonialism in his opinion:

We have to put all in the hands of God, maintain unity between the church and the community. As Apostle Paul says in Corinthians, "We are one body." As a body, all that affects the community will affect us, and we have to fight to firmly maintaining our convictions in God first, then we can tell the giants that come, like David told Goliath, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Samuel 17:45). The big economic interests cannot prevail against the church and the community.²²²

This participant was describing the systemic reality that we have to fight against. He integrates the faith perspective applied from the ecostories shared in the classes.

Participant G emphasized that, "We must be responsible for our own family and home, educating the children for this change". Participant B said: "We will invite the neighbors near the

²²² Participant D.

Asphalt Plant to the church and give them space here; I know of some that I can help invite”.

When we finished with the last question all applauded and were so glad. Then we shared a meal and they continued talking about the topic even when we had finished the video recording. The meeting finished with an applause and an attitude of happiness.

The knowledge matrix production in this conversation was affirmed by the experiences that they shared in the focus group interview. The most-mentioned topics in the interview will be listed in order from the most mentioned to the least mentioned.

Most-mentioned Topics

1. God/ God’s help, Christ, Jesus (23)
2. Spiritual Practices (Praying, Fasting, Vigils, Services, Conferences) (21)
3. Church/Congregations (15)
4. Fight, struggle, cause (14)
5. Environment (14)
6. Union / united we are stronger (13)
7. Community (12)
8. Taking care (12)
9. Theological Principles, faith, Bible (11)
10. Peaceful manifestations, marches (9)
11. Stewardship / responsibility / administrator (8)
12. Do not give up (8)
13. Education/ conferences/ worships (8)

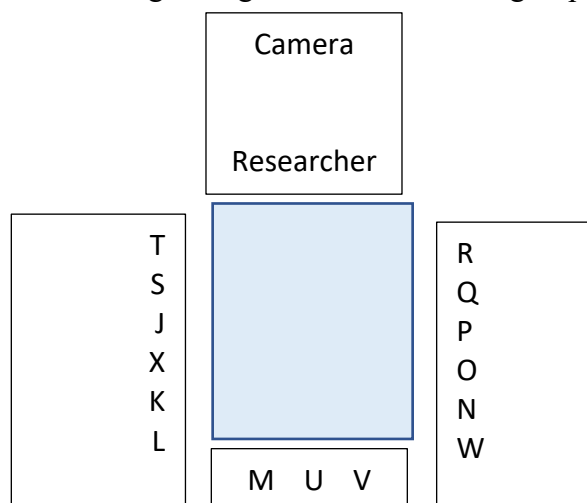
14. Love / Brotherhood (6)

15. Neighbor/ the others (5)

The most relevant and repeated concepts for this group began with the preeminence of spirituality as a guide to attend to the environmental challenges that affect the community. The participants highlighted the collaborative learning process as a significant one because they learned new concepts and things that they did not hear before these classes from the experiences of other congregations active in ecojustice. The participants described colonialism as an important element. The example of David and Goliath metaphor for the struggle against the big interests was a systemic view of reality of the oppression to humans and the environment. For me as a researcher this was a significant experience appreciating their own process, understanding ecotheology and ecojustice from the Puerto Rican Caribbean context and from the experiences of other congregations that shared their ecostories in a way that the Toa Alta congregation can consider and reflect in their own context.

Observations of the Toa Alta Focus Group PM

This diagram illustrates the seating arrangement for the focus group interview.



The following tables includes the demographic data of the Toa Alta PM Focus Group:

Table 10: Toa Alta PM Focus Group Age Range

Age Range	To what age range you belong (person)	Percent %
0 to 17	0	0
18 to 30	2	15.4
31 to 40	2	15.4
41 to 50	3	23.1
51 to 60	3	23.1
61 or more	0	0

Table 11: Gender Toa Alta PM

Male	Female
50% (7 persons)	50% (7 persons)

Table 12: Years belonging to the Congregation and Years Living in Toa Alta (PM Group)

Age Range	How many years you have been in Toa Alta congregations? (Person)	Percent %	How many years you have living in Toa Alta? (Person)	Percent %
1 to 5	4	30.8	1	11.1
6 to 15	7	53.8	2	22.2
16 to 30	0	0	1	11.1
31 to 50	1	7.7	1	11.1
51 or more	1	7.7	4	44.4

They began the interview with their papers in hand all attentive to the process. We read the rules for the focus group interview. The first impressions affirmed the impact that the ecostories had on the participants. Some were surprised of the involvement of churches in ecojustice issues. Participant M said: “I was surprised by the participation of churches in caring for the environment and the solidarity showed with the communities for better quality of life in the present and for future generations.” This aspect was one of the insights of the first answers in the interview. Participant P said: “We became aware that the situation was nearer than we thought.” The aspect of becoming aware and knowing about the connection between these ecojustice issues and the church for the first time was repeated in the conversation. Additionally, they emphasized what they had learned. The learning process was appreciated with Participant P’s statement: “Through these classes the church learned that we must take action in environmental

problems.” Participant U was impressed at the unity and brotherhood. Participant Q said that another thing she was impressed with was that some of the churches were small and they decided to confront the situation; they were brave, because if you have faith and you know who is backing you, nothing is impossible. The others talked about the unity with the community and the ecojustice demands from the churches.

The conversation continued and after I read the questions of the interview they quickly began to answer. Participant K described how people use strategies to maintain the church in a passive mode, as if the church had to endure all things; but, the church must be active and not passive, and these churches made the difference. This observation can be linked with the colonialist attitude of subjugating and being silent when facing power, but he states that it does not have to work this way. Participant P said that he was so motivated since the first class, Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, that he asked himself: What am I doing? My church? Other churches? That church inspired me by the way they managed the issue. They also mentioned the reference of the Goliath and David story with the Espinosa, Dorado case which had an ongoing constant struggle. Others highlighted the Peñuelas experience in dealing with the resistance inside the church. For many, this aspect was very interesting by the way they handled the situation of resistance inside the congregation. Participant S said that: “I admire how they dealt within their congregation even when members of their church worked for those companies, and some left the church, but they worked with wisdom, respect, and love so nobody felt bad and the unity of the church did not break. The pastoral care in this moment and the wisdom of leaders including the pastor that visited these members convinced them to return to church, although not all. The effort that the church in Peñuelas made in this area captured our attention because they continued to stand in

fighting for ecojustice, but they did not forget their members that were not aligned with the initiative. The testimony of Sarah Peisch in the Espinosa Dorado ecostory was something that was highlighted in the two focus group interviews in Toa Alta. Participant Q stated that the church in Dorado, while supporting the community in ecojustice struggles, they maintained their focus and with their testimony of presence and love, guided a life to Christ in the midst of a terrible illness. They also gave recommendations. For example, to support the struggle in Peñuelas, we must call our representative and ask him to do something in the legislature for the situation. They admired all the churches and highlighted the openness of the congregations to share church's facilities and the work in unity against the big interests that harm the environment in their communities. Participant J said: "My admiration is for all churches, Dorado, Hato Nuevo, Arecibo, and Peñuelas, because all fought strongly in favor of their communities." This admiration made the participants share more reflections about themselves and our congregation in Toa Alta.

The individual and collective views were revised. Participant Q said that "I knew as an individual that I had a responsibility for the environment, but I never thought that as a church, as collective, we can do something in common in favor for the ecojustice and now that I am here, I realize this". All were hearing her, and she laughed, and all laughed with her in that moment. Participant U said that when she arrived at the Toa Alta church, she noticed the environmental problem in the Toa Alta community for the first time, because she did not know about that and she argued that she was sure that maybe 60 % did not know about these struggles for ecojustice and churches in Puerto Rico. "Where I lived before, these things were not mentioned and thanks to these classes, it helps me see all these problems". Participant P

said that years before, people said that exterior problems must not be taken inside the church, but we must deal with these problems to help the community. Boff's liberation ecotheology invites us not only to deal with exterior problems outside church, but with all problems that affect us all. The testimony of unity was another aspect that they highlighted as evangelism. Participant Q said: "We are preaching unity and when the community sees us united, we give them testimony and they can say "Well, let's see what is happening there because they are seeking a place of unity and love to care for others". The majority of the participants expressed that they think differently before taking the classes and others shared that they were reaffirmed in the conviction that they have to care for the environment.

The answers about what they had learned about ecotheology and ecojustice in these classes were a contribution in the generation of knowledge from their own reflection. Participant L shared spiritual impressions like: "If we observed creation, we could see God talking to us." This affirmation experiencing the sacred through nature is part of our Christian beliefs that are described in the Bible, for example Psalm 19. They mentioned as a group, the instructions that God gave the human being since the beginning, since Genesis and to all of us. Learning ecotheology from the practical experience of other congregations is a collaborative form of learning that we are considering in this investigation. The participants affirmed what they had learned in these processes in the following statements: Participant J: "I learned about what God wants human beings to know through God's Word about the coexistence of the different ecosystems of creation. This is reaffirmed when God put humans as responsible administrators of Creation." The reference of this knowledge can be categorized as ecotheology or theology of creation. The understanding of the responsibility

established by God is clear through the knowledge of the Bible. Participant L: “Through the Scriptures God talks about creation and through creation he talks to us about love.” The reciprocity in which this participant describe ecotheology is a beautiful and almost poetic form of describing this concept. Participant Q: “I learned that ecotheology is the process in which the Word of God brings us to care for nature.” This description of ecotheology implies guidance through the word of God for the correct path to care for nature. This guidance is a process with many stages, but a necessary process in our times. Ecotheology, as a theology of crisis, is key to understanding contemporary challenges in these present times.

The process of knowing is a continuous one and can be a progressive one also.

Participant S: “The more the people know about the Word of God and know more about what God wants to be done with creation, the more people will care for creation.” The process of knowing more, as Gebara shared before, can be a process of detheologizing and revisiting the knowledge that affirms life and justice. Participant S describes it as a process in advance; expanding the knowing process will contribute to a deeper connection with creation and with God, who gave us this important responsibility. Participant T: “I learned that the Word of God has absolutely all the instructions to care for creation. God taught us that we must take care of creation and use what surrounds us correctly.” The reference to the Bible, as the Word of God. With an understanding of ecotheology demonstrates the appreciation of the original biblical message referring for caring for nature. Participant U said: “I learned about the right to fight for the environment, decrease contamination, improve people’s health and fight for having an island without contamination.” The right to fight for the environment seems more like a definition near the ecojustice concept, but this participant highlights that this right can

imply a change and an improvement directly in peoples' health and on the island. This view is an integral one that connects ecotheology with ecojustice and the practical reality of people in their health circumstances and the condition of the island on which they live.

The participants were in a flowing conversation about what they had learned. They shared concerns about ecojustice and their impressions on this important concept. Participant J said: "I learned that all of us have the right to ecojustice, no matter our social condition, this includes different living things and ecosystems that are the habitats for all. I also learned that I have to be ready to fight against projects or laws that threaten the wellbeing of the community or the ecosystem that sustains life". This first answer to the ecojustice question in the interview reflects a clear understanding about what ecojustice implies like, rights for people and the ecosystems. Also, the social condition is mentioned as part of the ecojustice issues and a reality that has to be overcome in the discrimination that many communities affected by environmental problems suffer. Uniting the spirituality and the physical life, they point to the importance of respect toward nature. Participant L said: "God's justice manifests in all directions and nature deserves our respect." This respect is for the wellbeing of all. Participant M: "Justice and truth can be achieved to improve our ecosystems". The attitude must be one of defense and care for what God has created. Participant O: "We must defend God's creation." Raising the rights of nature to the level of human rights is an advance in understanding the dignity and intrinsic value of all that God has created. Participant P said: "All have the same rights and responsibility, equity, justice for all, social position does not matter, nor status. God sent us to do justice, especially to the oppressed". Once again, Boff's liberation theology, in the frame of this investigation, the ecotheological liberation directs us

to do justice for the oppressed suffering contamination consequences and to do justice to the oppressed earth that groans and calls for us to action. Participant Q: “Ecojustice is the justice that is done to the Earth to keep it healthy.” The ecojustice done to the earth has direct consequences on human beings. Good done to the earth, is good done to all humans and all species on earth. Participant T mentioned the example of Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo church in their constant fight for ecojustice: “This is super important, for example, Guaynabo church fought and fought for environmental justice until they achieved their goal, thanks to God.” The example of this congregation and the other congregations, active in ecojustice struggles, inspires more reflections on our own contexts.

The learning process has been a collaborative one in which each congregation involved in the investigation, can share and learn from each other. Participant U said, “I learned that values like unity, struggling, perseverance, but putting God above all things helped us, through churches and government agencies, to overcome and win.” These Christian values are highlighted in ecojustice struggles in the ecojustice active congregations. It is very interesting how Participant N linked these core Christian values with ecojustice:

We are on this planet to care and defend it, because God created us in his image and likeness, and we are not supposed to harm nature. No other animal or natural process harms the environment, only we that have conscience. We affected it and destroyed it, when we threw the atomic bomb. We must be those who defend it; there is no need to have this unbalance in creation. Who are we to do all this harm? We are supposed to be creation administrators.²²³

²²³ Participant N.

The *imago dei* as a logical reason for caring for the environment, is key in the reflection process of this participant. This is an important aspect to reflect on.

The conversation turned to considering what interventions they thought fit in our own situation to respond to environmental problems in Toa Alta Pueblo. Participant T affirmed that the first thing that we had done is pray, and this is what the churches, active in ecojustice, have done, too. I have seen how we prayed and prayed, and wrote letters, went to the city hall, welcoming the press. Our church in Toa Alta has acted on this situation. I was surprised that the first answer in this part of the conversation was referring to those actions we have done. Participant J said that we can help in committee organization to seek for our resources and for the wellbeing of the community. The alternatives that the participants are sharing are accessible and possible. Participant P, on the same track shared that we can do many things in unity with the community; the church can look for resources from the same church and the government. They coincided in many ways in which the church can contribute doing activities like conferences, marches, workshops, recycling, camps and creative marches. In the conversation they shared all these advocacy activities as a real possibility and ideas that we could do in Toa Alta to support ecojustice for our community. They continued talking about these kinds of activities and one Participant V shared the impact that manifestations last summer 2019 had on Puerto Rico. Participant L explained that last summer, the people united and made the governor resign because of a series of moral scandals, such as mocking the deaths of Hurricane María in a chat. Participant K suggested lifting a camp in front of the Asphalt Plant to get the attention of the press. Participant L gave the idea of organizing a

march with respiratory masks so we can highlight the respiratory problems in the community directly. These and other ideas were shared in the conversation.

When the dialogue was about what they learned about hope, they continued with an engaging attitude. There are very interesting quotes from the questionnaires that we will share here and other important insights that emerged during the conversation. Participant T shared: “Hope is present in each church involved in the lesson series. Each church must have its hope firmly in God. Hope grows and becomes stronger in these processes to keep going forward in the environmental struggles.” Hope in the midst of hard circumstances is affirmed through all the conversation as a key element in ecojustice processes. Participant V said: “In these processes we have to be perseverant and not give up no matter how strong the struggle is. Because at the end we will have the reward.” Even when not all struggles in the ecojustice active churches have ended, the progress in the fight and the victories in their path stir up hope. Another aspect in the conversation was the invitation to not minimize the small congregations or the few people that serve in a church:

Do not believe that we are few people facing big corporations, because God backs up what is done for justice. We cannot think that we are a small church, and that we cannot endure and overcome the situation. We must remember who is the One that is with us, the Lord who has overcome all situations. We have to focus on our children. We saw the children participating with signs, marching, and learning, in the other churches. They want ecojustice, too.”²²⁴

The emphasis on younger generations is very important in the context of the Toa Alta congregation. The inclusion of younger generations was something done by the other ecojustice churches and something that contributes in the developing of creation care

²²⁴ Participant S.

awareness for the present and the future. The aspect of economic pressures on the communities were addressed in the conversation. Participant M states that: “With God all struggles produce hopeful results. Even against the most powerful giants of the big economic interests we can have positive results.” The motivation that hope inspires through these experiences is present in this conversation. Participant Q said: “You must never lose hope, but more than hope, you must not lose faith in God, who fights our battles day to day.” Hope on a daily basis in practical life, is considered in the dialogue. The faith in the God that fights our battles day to day, is the reassurance of the presence of hope in the midst of difficult challenges. Participant P talked about faith: “Faith in God and in His promises are for everyone. In God we have hope; in God’s time he will give the solution. You can lose everything, but you must never forget hope.” The repeated invitation in this part of the conversation is to not lose hope. The value of perseverance is reinforced in understanding hope. Participant K shared: “Consistency and teamwork bring hope.” Many times the hard circumstances and the ecojustice issue are complex and extend long periods of time. Many times, people get discouraged but the dialogue helps people when they feel hopeless. Participant J added: “I learned that we must remember those who were discouraged. They must never lose hope, always have faith and united we are stronger.” Hope is present in this conversation and one of the participants drew the group’s attention with her reflection on hope and the Toa Alta congregation:

I believe that in our church we are cultivating hope. In the project for children, Explorers of God’s Creation, we are teaching them to recycle, sow trees, not throw garbage, care for the earth. We teach them a lot of things. This church is cultivating

hope for these kids so they cannot repeat the same errors as their parents. I believe that we are sowing hope and this hope is acting in this aspect.”²²⁵

Everyone agreed on what she said, and they applauded her. For me it was a significant appreciation of this children’s project in our congregation in Toa Alta and the efforts that have been done little by little. Cultivating hope is an outstanding concept we must give more attention to, in the evaluation chapter.

The conversation progressed toward sharing strategies that they are willing to do. The ideas that emerged were diverse and they adapted to our own situation in the Toa Alta congregation from activities already done to others that were new. Months earlier, the congregation in Toa Alta celebrated a prayer service in the public square of Toa Alta because of contamination that the community and the school children had suffered because of the Asphalt Plant. Participant W remembered the service at the public square for the children and he invited us to do another one because, not only our church but other churches from the community were present. Also, we could go to the City Hall and demand that this town begin to recycle. This town does not recycle. and I understand that the central government gave them funds to do this. Participant L said we could give workshops about recycling and prayer vigils with other churches. They agreed and were attentive to other ideas and suggestions. Participant M said that one of the actions that we could do as a church in Toa Alta is meeting with the community in a reorganization process including all representative groups of the community so they can have hope in the situation with the landfill. Participant M suggested an order for these actions. First, an educational process and then we can do other initiatives

²²⁵ Participant T.

seeking the closing of the Landfill. Spiritual practices were present in each suggestion that the participants gave. Participant Q included the spiritual practice of visiting as part of bringing support to the families in ecojustice situations:

We as the church, can bring hope to people and families that lives near the site. We can visit this community giving them hope, assuring them that they are not alone in the problem, taking time to hear them, hear their ideas and what they think we as a church can do to help them. Listening to them, they can have hope that we are helping and thinking of them.²²⁶

This participant said this with happiness, realizing that we could share the gospel in this way, too. This approach reminds me of Boff ecoliberation theology specially the emphasis on listening to the poor because they can be the protagonists of their liberation. We can listen to people that live near the Landfill and accompany them in the process of their liberation from the oppression of contamination, to the hope of ecojustice for their community. I agree and I think that this is a wonderful and great idea to accompany the community in such challenges that they had with the Landfill. This is evangelism, too; accompanying and being with the people in their needs.

In addition to ideas, they also highlighted the attitudes in the process that we envision to carry out. Participant U said, “Perseverance must be present in each advocacy activity that we will do.” Also, this participant made reference to Participant W’s contribution when he mentioned that the municipality receives funds from the government for recycling and Participant U mentioned that we must talk with the mayor and have a meeting with him regarding recycling:

²²⁶ Participant Q.

If we do the things with perseverance and persist, and persist, we can achieve things. Also, we need to have more media coverage, television exposure and talk about these environmental problems on a daily basis, because it is not only this municipality. There are another towns in Puerto Rico that we did not know that have these problem and they are silent and maybe they do not know how to deal with these ecojustice problems. We must persist like Peñuelas, Arecibo, and Espinosa; they keep fighting. We can do the same. Because they won and we in Toa Alta can win also, but we cannot limit ourselves to one meeting and forget that; we must keep fighting because we are being affected also, our elderly is ill, and we need to stand and say “stop!” “Enough.” We as a church cannot do this alone.²²⁷

This participant made an emphasis in the perseverance that we had learned from the ecostories and the perseverance that we must show in our ecojustice challenges in Toa Alta. She also reflected on how other places on the island are dealing with these kinds of problems. Thinking about others is an important path to address these complex and challenging issues of ecojustice in our communities.

Reflecting on what they had learned in this process they shared ideas and validated other opinions as well. Participant L said that she learned that the great battles begin in the home, educating. “We are individuals, but we are part of sharing this teaching to others.” Participant T said: “I learned that sadly there are people that if these classes would not be given; they would not know about these environmental problems. Sadly, there are many problems here in Puerto Rico, but the church always confronts them with God in prayer, faith, and hope. That has been fundamental for ecojustice.” In that context, Participant K affirmed: “If churches did not get united, we would not know about these issues. If we had not taken the courses, we would know nothing about this.” In the conversation, they affirmed that they knew about ecojustice struggles because of the classes. These classes opened new knowledge,

²²⁷ Participant U.

and knowledge is power and responsibility. Talking about responsibility, the same participant emphasizes the seriousness of this situation:

We are talking about people that play with the lives of others without conscience and they do not care. We cannot continue in passiveness. We have to be proactive in this struggle, because people are being disregarded by these companies. The companies do not think they can affect the Puerto Rican people, no, they do not care, they are here for their economy and they forget about all. To face this, we need unity, definitely.²²⁸

The description that this participant has contributed is linked directly with colonialism in Puerto Rico and how the economy of external forces has affected the people of Puerto Rico in their health and also the territory's economy. The big multinational companies do not invest their profit in Puerto Rican banks. They harm the local economy, while affecting our health and ecosystem. It is a very degraded system that oppresses others. The colonialism lenses are an important part of this reflection as a reality that we are dealing with in all aspects of our life in Puerto Rico. Participant J shared her experiences:

Through the study of these four experiences, an awareness was created in me about the scope that our CCDOC can have including us as church members and leaders in helping to solve the environmental problems that we have in Toa Alta. Also, seeing the firm attitude that the churches showed was a stimulus for me to know that the challenges are enormous, and we learned that all is possible with God's intervention, and the unity of his creatures in favor of creation will help.²²⁹

At one point, Participant V referred to the summer experience of marches in Puerto Rico. "If with one march, we could depose a governor, we can do more with more marches."

²²⁸ Participant K.

²²⁹ Participant J.

Puerto Rico has lived many experiences in the ecojustice struggles and one of the most intense and lengthy has been the one in Vieques. Participant M said:

I am convinced that when people unite, they will never be defeated. Another example is when the people got united for Vieques. I remember, because I was there, that the churches were in Vieques and they had prayer services in the public square. The Catholic Church bishop Roberto González had so much participation and also the Evangelical Church leaders. Sometimes the church is criticized, including pastors and bishops, because of the separation between church and state but the church must participate in people's problems.²³⁰

Participant P said: "We are the people." In this moment, all nodded and affirmed what was said. Participant M said "We must participate; we must not be inactive. Many people die from cancer and also are now dying as a consequence of bomb contamination." Participant S highlighted the reference of the marches in the summer of 2019 and shared: "There was only one person that called for the marches in summer. We can be as this person inviting others from our families, the church, the ones that are outside the church, and do it for this cause. Only one can begin and put the first step." Participant Q highlighted her experience:

This classes that have been given to us, have the effect that the church in Toa Alta can be more open and empowered. They empowered us in caring for creation, in sharing the truth, in a summary of all, the church was empowered, because after these classes something happens. In my experience I went to Cataño in these days and in the bay that is very beautiful I saw a snack bag floating in the water and my heart did this (she moved her hands like she was squeezing something) and I said to the person that was beside me: How sad this is, maybe nobody put it in the water, but it will up end in the sea (and she repeated the gesture of squeezing with her hands). I believed that these classes and processes brought results, good results. This was so good.²³¹

The personal experience that she shared in this interview was the same that a relative of this participant shared in the focus group interview in the previous morning. The affirmation of

²³⁰ Participant M.

²³¹ Participant Q.

this participant moved me as a researcher and helped me to appreciate all that has been done from the beginning and in all the processes of the project.

As a researcher, I was impressed with how much they had learned and how they articulated this new knowledge. Gebara offers keys to understand this emerging knowledge and new processes. They talked about ecotheology and ecojustice practicing what they had learned with these classes and were reaffirmed in the importance of caring about the earth.

The most-mentioned concepts in this Toa Alta group interview and in the questionnaires of this group in the evening (The number in parenthesis is the time each concept was mentioned).

1. Church / Congregations (76)
2. God / Christ / Lord (56)
3. Fight / Struggle / Battle / Cause (47)
4. Communities / Community (37)
5. Unity / Union (26)
6. Peaceful Manifestations (Marches, Protests, Camps) (24)
7. Environment (22)
8. Overcome / Achieve / Accomplish (22)
9. Hope (19)
10. Learn (18)
11. Spiritual Practices (16)
12. Caring for Nature / Planet / Creation (15)
13. Creation (15)

14. Justice (13)

15. Knowledge/ knowing/ knew (13)

Most-Mentioned Phrases

1. Caring for nature/ creation/ planet (15)

2. Get involved (5)

3. Fight for justice (5)

4. Union of churches (5)

5. Never lose hope (5)

6. Big economic interests (5)

7. Do not give up (4)

The concept of creation (15) was mentioned most often, follow by planet (7), earth (3) and the least, nature (2). The group mentioned all the congregations but the most mentioned was Peñuelas and it makes sense because is the most recent issue presented in the news. The group mentioned the landfill problem more times than the asphalt plant. They mentioned some interesting concepts only once but for me were interesting to highlight as a researcher, such as spiritual counseling, empowered, learning process, and body of Christ. This meeting or focus group was a blessing like the other meetings. The words or phrases that resonated more with me were: “Pastor you have empowered us with these classes.” “We have learned that we can help the community more.” “We did not know about churches that did this kind of work with the community.” “Cultivating hope.”

Another aspect that caught my attention as a researcher was that they mentioned a few efforts that we as a church had done in Toa Alta that I believed were unnoticed, but that was not the case because they mentioned what the Toa Alta church had done for the environment. The collection of data stage of the investigation with the ecojustice group and the Toa Alta group was completed by October 2019. This process, including the Lesson Series in Ecojustice, took six months. What significance does this project have for Toa Alta?

CHAPTER FIVE: SIGNIFICANCE TO TOA ALTA AND COMMUNITIES THAT SUFFERS ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Learning is an ongoing process. Participant A, of the Toa Alta congregation, told me: “Pastor, before the classes I believed that churches do not get involved in these kinds of issues but now, I understand that is part of being a Christian; to support and participate in ecojustice issues for the wellbeing of the community.” Being willing to explore new ways of thinking and changing our previous conceptions are an essential part of a learning process. The significance of this investigation for Toa Alta and other communities that suffer from environmental problems, is the opportunity to learn from others that have walked this path before, that have experienced suffering, injustice, and sorrow but overcome those challenges with God’s help and with the capacity of acquiring new knowledge through such experiences.

I also observed that humility is an important element in the collaborative learning process. We need humility to recognize the character and value of other congregations and communities even when they assume positions that are not familiar with us. This process showed me that collaboration was key to this investigation. Ecojustice leaders throughout the Toa Alta congregation should share their wisdom about their processes of self-reflection and self-improvement and how they have already started caring for the earth. The CCDOC in Toa Alta learned important aspects in this process that we will share in this evaluation chapter. The congregation in Toa Alta is not the only one that had learned in this process. The ecojustice leaders and I, as a researcher, had learned together from each other’s experiences of the

ecojustice struggles in Puerto Rico. The willingness to be exposed to new knowledge and the collaborative learning process is part of understanding the reality for caring God's creation.

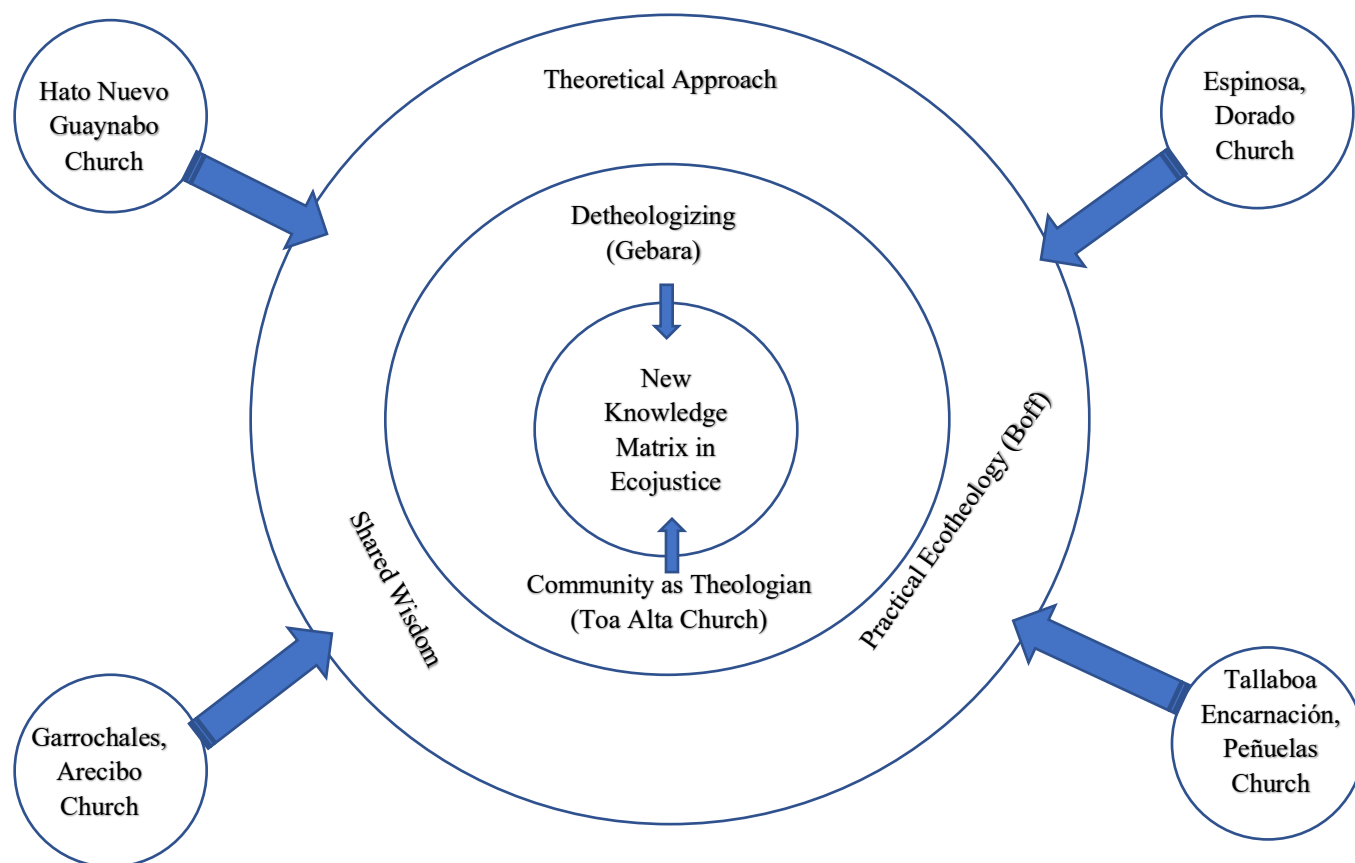
Collaborative Learning Process

The Toa Alta congregation's answers to the Post-Questionnaire survey and the conversations of the two focus groups in Toa Alta both confirmed reflected that the participants had deepened their understanding about ecotheology and ecojustice. Some of the Toa Alta participants in the focus group interviews had recognized the project as a process in which they had encountered ecotheology and ecojustice challenges for the first time from a church's perspective. The majority of the conservative churches in Puerto Rico think that ecojustice and other community issues are external problems, and that the church must not deal with such mundane circumstances. This exclusion of ecojustice by some is part of a theology that does not resonate with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Progressive churches also had taken a stand on supporting environmental struggles in their communities, like the ecostories we had shared in this project. I had observed that the Toa Alta congregation had an open attitude toward what we shared from the other four churches and they decided to consider and change part of the knowledge they had before the project experience.

The collaborative learning process on ecotheology and ecojustice took place and generated a matrix of knowledge not only for the Toa Alta congregation but also for the ecojustice leaders and for this researcher. I think that other congregations experiencing similar situations could appreciate the ecostories and the Toa Alta experience in their own contexts. I conceived the project as a progressive process in concentric circles that at some point in the

center produced new knowledge by a detheologizing process as Ivone Gebara suggests. The following diagram illustrates the learning process as I observed it:

Diagram 2: Collaborative Learning Process in Ecojustice



This diagram illustrates the interactions between churches whose leaders were active ecojustice leaders and the Toa Alta congregation that received and processed the wisdom and knowledge shared in the process. The project's design allowed me to gather the congregation for a series of ecojustice lessons from the four churches and being able to reflect on practical ecotheology with a diverse theoretical approach, specifically from the scientific and ecological theory framework.

Members of Toa Alta Pueblo that wanted to continue reflecting on this topic participated in two focus groups interviews that allowed them to reflect on ways in which they could contribute to the environmental problems of the Landfill and the Asphalt Plant in the Toa Alta community. This reflection provoked a detheologizing process of some concepts and enhanced the ecotheological understanding of Toa Alta. The community as theologian became a reality with the discerning of strategies and ways to cope with complex ecojustice problems in the community, when it became the main concern in the conversations in the Toa Alta focus group interviews. The production of new knowledge in ecojustice and the collaborative learning process between churches are a significant part of what the Toa Alta congregation learned from the leaders active in ecojustice issues in the congregations that participated in this project. Also, I can affirm that the Toa Alta congregation reflects on itself and in the efforts that as a church it has done in favor of caring for the environment and in many other efforts they can implement in the near future.

The Toa Alta congregation learned patterns that they identified in the four congregations active in ecojustice. The Toa Alta Focus Group highlighted the important contribution of a church's intervention pattern when an ecojustice problem occurred in the community. Another important pattern that captured the Toa Alta focus group's attention was how the ecojustice leaders dealt with resistance inside their congregations because of being involved in ecojustice issues in the community. I present these patterns, which I observed in the ecojustice focus groups and in the Series Lessons on Ecojustice offered to the Toa Alta congregation. Also, I will highlight and discuss the Toa Alta focus group insights and new knowledge that emerged from the ecojustice class conversations.

Church Engaging with the Community; Ecojustice Group's Pattern Observed

A symbiotic relationship happens when two different species share a close relationship that may or may not benefit the other species. One of the three types of symbiotic relationships is mutualism. Mutualism is a symbiotic relationship in which both species benefit.²³² The relationship observed in the four ecostories reflect the mutualism between the churches and their communities. Each congregation and its community benefit from the collaborative work that they forged and from the achievements they obtained from the struggles for ecojustice. I had observed a similar pattern repeated in each one of the four congregations that made extraordinary efforts to work for the wellbeing of their communities. I observed many similarities between the materials I received from the congregations. Toa Alta participants also highlighted the interactions that these ecojustice leaders developed with the community on behalf of all people and the ecosystem. Reflecting on their accounts of the experiences, I consider these twelve elements present in each church's intervention in the ecojustice struggles in their communities.

1. Visiting the community and hearing its concerns about the environmental problem.
2. Consulting with church's leadership (pastoral and lay) to be involved in such claims.
3. Organizing the community through the collaboration of the church and community leaders.
4. Constant contact and recurring meetings (weekly), creating a strong communication system with telephone directories and local communication systems.

²³² Symbiotic Relationships (Mutualism, Commensalism, and Parasitism) 17.2, Accessed July 29, 2020, https://www.ck12.org/book/cbse_biology_book_class_xii/section/17.2/.

5. Contact with scientific resources, academic resources, governmental agencies (federal and local), other congregations in the community, and other environmental or community organizations.
6. Organizing educational and religious activities (ecumenical vigils, meetings, prayer services) with an emphasis on ecotheological messages, like stewardship and creation care.
7. Having interviews with the press on radio, newspaper, and television informing of the environmental problems that the community faces and the group's efforts to achieve ecojustice.
8. Strengthening, group cohesion and solidarity with diverse religious, cultural, and fund-raising activities.
9. Including all generations in the struggle for ecojustice (children, youth, adults, and the elderly).
10. Organizing and participating in advocacy activities (public hearings, letters, postcards, marches, permanent camps, and other strategies) for ecojustice in the community against the contaminating industries affecting the health and the wellbeing of the people.
11. Celebrating the small and huge victories in the journey for ecojustice in the community.
12. Being aware of possible new threats for the community and remaining alert for present and new challenges.

The interventions of these ecojustice churches are one way to consider what fits my own congregation and community instead of being a rigid model. This pattern invites the congregation and clergy to revise our relationships with the community and how the church can work to help solve its problems. Certainly, some challenges are greater than others and all

communities and churches have their own idiosyncrasies. Each community has its particular challenges and resources to cope with. The church can and must be present and serve like Jesus did to the people in need, including the communities confronting environmental problems. The ecojustice leaders did not have a map with which to proceed when they began working on these problems, but they did have God's guidance, a genuine desire to help and walk beside their community, and most important, a love for the people and for God's creation. These ecojustice leaders within their congregations and communities developed a practical ecotheological approach that deserves to be known, studied, and valued as a contribution to the present and future church and community work in our societies.

Another interesting pattern that I observed was how the ecojustice leaders dealt with resistance inside their own congregations. The pattern of dealing with resistance to ecojustice issues inside the congregation is an important contribution. Confronting hard realities like the economic hardships, lack of employment, and at the same time, health issues related to pollutant industries is a difficult task inside a congregation. When members of the same congregation work in the industry that is contaminating the ecosystem and other members are demanding the closure of the company it is a complex situation. Theological conceptions influenced how churches decided to be involved in ecojustice issues. In the case of Hato Nuevo, the members did not confront resistance inside the congregation. Arecibo did not present resistance. Only some questions of one member according to one of the ecojustice leaders. In Arecibo's case, all the church's board agreed that the church should help the community in the incinerator case.

The two congregations that described how they had dealt with resistance inside of their congregations were Espinosa, Dorado, and Tallaboa, Encarnación, Peñuelas. The pattern I observed in these two congregations can be a guide to other congregations that are confronting

similar problems. Both congregations confronted the reality of having members that were opposed to the church's involvement in ecojustice issues in the community. Similar strategies that were present in both churches include:

1. Wisdom to manage the resistance. This kind of resistance required wisdom in both congregations to approach members that had expressed their restraint.
2. Both congregations appealed for stewardship and scientific orientation in Christian Education processes.
3. Comprehension and love permeated the efforts of those dealing with members opposed to the church's involvement in ecojustice issues.
4. Each congregation also made other efforts. Tallaboa Encarnación, Peñuelas visited the members that left the congregation, and these visits resulted in the return of some members. Espinosa, Dorado continued to talk with members who worked in the concrete plant. They used scientific information to convince the other members to reclaim health and wellbeing for the community.

The love and comprehension that Peñuelas and Espinosa gave with wisdom in each church produced the opportunity to grow and mature as a Christian congregation. In these examples, collective pastoral care from the church as the Body of Christ to the communities that struggle for ecojustice is present. Ecojustice leaders, in their gestures and body language, expressed that dealing with this kind of resistance was not an easy task. They emphasized the wisdom and guidance from God that they needed in these circumstances. Also, they highlighted love over all things, is the focus of the interventions with resistance to ecojustice struggles inside a congregation.

A Practical Ecotheological Approach

Ecotheological interpretations influence the spiritual practices that ecojustice leaders put in place in their congregations and communities. Ecotheological biblical interpretations and convictions support the efforts, hard work, and time invested in each struggle for ecojustice. I had observed the presence of spiritual practices, like prayers, before beginning meetings, organizing ecumenical services, vigils, prayer dynamics like prayer chains, and fasting as a resistance to evil structures present in ecojustice issues. Also, two of the congregations, Dorado and Peñuelas practiced visitation to their neighbors. Neighbors affected by the contamination received a visit from the ecojustice leaders, and on some occasions, the pastor was present to pray for those that were ill with conditions, like cancer. When you are capable of seeing other people's pain and hearing and praying for them, sharing common concerns about health and wellbeing results in a special sense of bonding and solidarity. Ecotheological interpretations about stewardship, solidarity, and justice, guide spiritual practices and contribute to a form of collective pastoral care for the community.

The immediate community that suffers injustice needs to see Christian commitment not only inside the congregation or in Christian circles, but in the practices for ecojustice. Ecojustice Leader B emphasizes the evangelistic aspect of practical ecotheology: 'Earth's dignity is part of church's evangelistic mission; this is a way of spreading the gospel. Our service and Christian witness are an evangelistic method.' Living and sharing the gospel of Jesus resonates in her ecotheological interpretation of the work they had done as a church with the community. I had realized that every effort done by the ecojustice leaders and their congregations with the community inspired by ecotheology can be named as a practical ecotheological approach.

Pastoral and lay leadership made the difference in the church's response to environmental problems in the communities. All ecojustice leaders recognize the important role of the Pastor and church leaders in guiding the church to be involved in ecojustice issues. Theological education through sermons, Bible studies, and meditations can guide the members of the church when considering their own knowledge about creation care and reconsidering new insights that emerge from Christian education toward "green" lenses. Ivone Gebara, in her ecofeminist approach, invites us to continuously revise our knowledge, especially when we confront difficult realities. Pastors and lay leaders in a congregation have a unique opportunity to enhance Biblical and ethical views of specific problems that affect the congregation and the community. The ecojustice leaders emphasize the key role of ecclesial leadership in guiding their congregations to serve the community and being present in their struggles for ecojustice. Ecotheology is a theology of crisis, and in these particular times, sustaining Christian faith and strength in a Biblical way is a responsibility of ecclesial leadership, especially of the Pastor or Priest in that specific congregation. Pertinent ecclesial leadership in practical ecotheology can make the difference in the congregation, the community, and beyond.

Ecojustice leaders testify of the great impact that the presence of the Pastor or lay leaders had in advocacy manifestations, marches, public hearings, and other activities supporting ecojustice struggles in the community. In Peñuelas for example, when the situation between protesters and the police were tense, the good counsel and the peaceful presence of pastoral and lay leadership made a difference in managing the situation in a calm mode and it avoided violent incidents. God calls us to be agents of peace in just demands for the wellbeing of the environment and people's health. Leadership demonstrated by example and wise decisions can guide a congregation to be active in ecojustice issues in their community. Like Ivone Gebara

uses Jesus's example of leadership and hope, the ecojustice leader F affirmed Jesus's example as her inspiration to continue in the struggle: "Jesus taught me that when there is injustice and abuse, we have to take it out. We cannot lose our capacity to feel indignation." We as ecclesiastical leaders do not need to be ecologists or ecotheologians to respond to people's needs in our congregations and communities. We need to have an inner sense of justice and the example of the greatest leader, Jesus Christ, who is present in people's needs and walks with them in their contexts and situations to heal and bring liberation by the power of God.

Spiritual practices were part of the struggles for ecojustice. Ecojustice leaders reflected God's love through the support they brought to the community. The church participation in respect to others' beliefs and the openness to celebrate ecumenical services were part of the spiritual practices that were present in these kinds of struggles. Also, another spiritual practice that the churches mentioned, was visiting the people in their houses in the community to reach out and knew their needs before developing any activity. Spiritual practices present in the four ecostories include: ecotheological sermons, Christian education on stewardship, prayer services in strategic sites, distribution of informational material, ecumenical vigils, visiting affected people, prayers in peaceful manifestations, creating new ministries at church, like The Environmental and Health ministry in Espinosa, Dorado, celebrating Planet Earth Day and developing ecological activities with children. In the community struggles for the wellbeing of the bioregion these practices were repeated in each one of the ecostories with variants and different ways to implement them but always present as a church.

The practical ecotheological approach from the ecojustice congregations helped to develop a strong bond between church and community. Christian values, such as respect, integrity, civility, love, and commitment were present in the four ecostories. Ecojustice Leader J,

in Peñuelas, shared an important view related with the community. “The Church must not be silent when an environmental problem is affecting its surroundings. We must not be silent in front of injustices done to vulnerable communities. Our principal motivation to be in protests is the care for our ecosystem because our lives depend on it and God commands us to do this.” Caring for vulnerable and poor communities is a call from God to all Christians. As part of liberation theology key exponents, Boff emphasizes caring for the poor with the active participation of the poor. The connection between church and community for the liberation of the poor in these circumstances is the degraded ecosystem and that the affected people facilitate the ecoliberation process. The holistic vision that this ecojustice leader shared was the product of intense activity with the community. The church and community engagement was another constant in each of the ecostories. This engagement facilitated developing joint strategies for the fight for ecojustice that could bring ecoliberation for the community.

Creative and diverse forms of protesting and making ecojustice demands were a constant in the struggles of these churches with their communities. Ecotheological interpretations and the ecojustice leaders’ sense of justice guided their advocacy actions. Advocacy efforts included all generations. In Hato Nuevo, younger generations had an active role in public hearings and peaceful manifestations for the wellbeing of creation for present and future generations. Arecibo and Peñuelas, had a permanent camp, and Hato Nuevo used aerial photos and a poem in a Christmas card sent to the government agencies involved in the permit process of the landfill project. Espinosa demanded that the public hearings with the EPA needed to be in Spanish. Every single case developed many advocacy strategies united with the community. Advocacy strategies can be used by churches that confront environmental problems in the community

today. Advocacy to attend ecojustice issues from the church is a clear manifestation of practical ecotheology.

New Knowledge Matrix

A new knowledge matrix is a related concept by Gebara on ecofeminism in her book *Longing for Running Waters* in which ecofeminism calls on new understandings of the role of religion in human life. This process is exactly how I can describe what happened with the Toa Alta congregation in this project after being exposed to the ecojustice series lessons and the focus group conversations. In our context in Toa Alta, participants learned which actions they considered could be an alternative to our ecological challenges. Possible actions in practical theology emerged from the collaborative learning process. The Toa Alta participants had the willingness to deepen and change some of their theological understandings by their reflection on the ecostories. Gebara's ecofeminism, Boff's ecotheology with the Biblical interpretations, and the ecostories helped in shaping the response of Toa Alta participants.

Insights and New Ways to Approach the Environmental Problems in Toa Alta

An interesting and participative experience in the last class on Ecojustice came from the alternatives that the participants presented in an exercise. The class exercise consisted of dividing the participants in small groups to talk about one of the environmental problems in Toa Alta and give one strategy that they can use in that particular problem. As a positioned researcher, I observed the groups gathering and offering viable alternatives to address a specific environmental problem in the community. I will share some of the proposals for interventions that they considered for Toa Alta context in light of what they had learned through the classes.

The importance of the strategies mentioned in this exercise demonstrate a concerted agreement in each group and demonstrate the willingness to implement these strategies.

Educative efforts, advocacy, and community organization were interesting activities mentioned by the groups that chose the landfill. Three of eleven groups chose to present alternatives to the Landfill problem. For the Landfill, they proposed preparing a brochure describing how the Landfill affects the community, preparing a recycling project for the community or reclaiming it from the municipality, increasing conscience beginning in our families, recycling, reusing, and not buying plastic. They proposed to unite efforts with other churches and the government and organize the people that live near the landfill because they are directly affected in their health. In addition, they suggested contacting health authorities, looking for litigation and promoting these problems in the social media and supporting conferences and marches. These concrete suggestions to attend to the Landfill environmental crisis are very valuable because before these classes the only intervention the church agreed to do was praying in the prayer services for the people that suffered the contamination of the Landfill. I understand that the effect of knowing about other congregations active in ecojustice issues motivated the Toa Alta participants to explore new ways to address the landfill issue from the insights that this process allowed to emerge.

The Asphalt Plant contamination problem is one that continues affecting the neighbors and the three schools in the downtown area. Five of eleven groups chose to share alternatives to cope with this environmental problem. These five groups propose having marches outside Toa Alta to create awareness, peaceful protests, using the communication media and learning more about the problem. They also mentioned the concept of wisdom to creating conscience. Addressing ecojustice issues with wisdom in a conservative congregation in the Puerto Rican

context is vital. Peñuelas and Espinosa emphasized the importance of managing these kinds of issues in the congregation with wisdom. They mentioned education and health aspects of this problem. The creation of a new committee with various congregation's members who can work with the ecosystem issues and receive information from the community was an important suggestion. At the same time, this committee can search for alternatives to the problems and present alternatives to the church for supporting the neighbors and present it to the community. I appreciated all the suggestions so much, specially creating a committee because is an important step to engaging with the community in their environmental problems. The willingness to suggest concrete actions to be attended to in the Toa Alta congregation is very significant. At the end of this exercise each group shared their insights and suggested interventions. One group mentioned another problem; the abandoned houses and the consequences related to that issue. The other two groups did not choose a particular problem and talked in a general way of environmental problems.

The experience of gathering together in two different focus groups to discuss the Ecojustice Series Lessons was an experience to deepen the knowledge that was shared. This opportunity of gathering together after the Lesson Series on Ecojustice is an opportunity to reflect theologically as a community. The two focus groups that met at different hours and different days had common and particular contributions to the learning process. If we consider the demographic characteristics of the two groups, the dominant age range in the AM focus group was 61 years or more, representing the 78 % of this group. The majority of the participants are elderly people and also the majority of the participants are female. The PM group had a more balanced distribution in age range. This distribution includes younger generations with lower percent participation than the other age ranges.

The insertion of younger generations is defining in the sense that it brings continuity and common solidarity with those youth who will rise and also those who will be born on this planet and will participate in our congregation and community. The contribution that we can develop in the ecojustice efforts from our churches and our communities today will be inherited by the next generations. Hato Nuevo's ecostory account emphasizes the aspect of including younger generations in the work for caring for the earth.

The tendencies of both groups were making a contribution and sharing what they had learned. New knowledge and the appropriation of it from the participants was a significant experience and included a rediscovery of the practical ecotheological steps that Toa Alta church had begun in a slow but important way. The experience in both was enriching and inspiring.

The AM Focus group surprised me with the willingness and seriousness with which they considered the ecojustice problems in the four congregations and the new ways in which they expressed our problems in the Toa Alta community. All participants coincided in the importance of these four ecostories and the contribution to the community and churches like ours. This group emphasized the spiritual practices inserted in the ecojustice interventions. The new knowledge that the participants identified in the research process did not mean that in other experiences it was not known. This shared knowledge is part of the insights and changes they perceived in themselves through being exposed to the ecostories and their reflection on them. Espinosa, Dorado ecojustice leaders highlight pastoral care with the Sara Peisch experience that Toa Alta interpreted as an accompanying element in the midst of environmental struggles. Toa Alta's new knowledge points to defining this experience as preaching without words. The spiritual practices were the second concept most repeated in this focus group interview.

New knowledge emerges also from changes in the way we perceive actions and process. Resistance to change is always present and sometimes I understand that is part of the natural process of understanding human dynamics. One participant in the conversation raised a conservative point of view about avoiding marches and manifestations. The participant highlights the violence that is seen in the media with these practices. All heard with respect, but at the same time various participants affirmed that one of the concepts that had changed in them, after the classes, was considering the marches and peaceful processes as important and effective mechanisms to achieve being heard. These mechanisms provoke changes and progress in the claims for ecojustice and the wellbeing of the communities. The group emphasizes that they acquired this new knowledge about ecotheology and indicate that many times the environmental problems are because of a lack of knowledge in this area. Regarding this point, one of the participants said that in this experience, it was the first time he heard the concept of ecotheology. Teaching others and sharing this new knowledge is a responsibility.

Regarding the Landfill problem, this focus group compared the past system organization in Puerto Rico in which each town had their landfill. On the island, we now have huge regional landfills that affect more the communities that surround the site. The previous system contaminated less than today's present regional landfills like Toa Alta. Decades before, they remembered that plastic was not present like today. The participants linked the landfill problem with other problems in agriculture because of colonialism. In addition, they connected the asphalt plant problem with economic interests in the municipality against the communities' health. It is significant for the investigation that the participants can link deep and complex systemic conflicts in society. Identifying this level of reality is part of the knowledge matrix that emerges from the collaborative learning process in practical ecotheology.

The prophetic voice of the church was highlighted as one of the reasons why the church is rejected in some social circles. When we, as a church denounce environmental problems in the community, we are denouncing injustice and many times the economic and political interests collide with justice demands for health and carrying capacity of our resources. The church must be that voice for the ones that are voiceless, but also empower them to recover and lift their voice. Another participant made an invitation to be more aware to hear what the Earth wants to tell us. The articulation that ecotheology brings with concepts that we can rescue from theology of creation and the Bible were part of the knowledge that emerged in our faith community in Toa Alta through these classes. “What the Earth wants to tell us” is not a common phrase that can be heard often in our congregation in Toa Alta. The comment always resonates to the integral ecofeminism dimension that Gebara highlights in her ecotheology.

New knowledge guides us to new theological interpretations as a way of detheologizing like Gebara invites. The experience, as workings of the Spirit, must guide the church to concrete actions. The participants of Toa Alta AM Focus Group offered ideas like having more active participation, inviting the Asphalt Plant neighbors to the church, promoting changes to care for the environment in their families, educating children, and continuing in the church looking to care for the earth from inside the church toward the community.

The PM Focus group in Toa Alta shared the new knowledge they acquired through the classes. Some participants expressed surprise about the participation of churches in caring for the environment and the solidarity they showed with the community. Knowing about these kinds of ecojustice issues and the church was new for some of the participants. The impression moved one participant to ask himself: What am I, my church and other churches doing? The fact that some of the ecojustice churches have few members does not influence their participation. The

churches confronted the environmental problems of the community with bravery like David against Goliath.

Similar to the AM focus group this PM focus group was impressed by how a congregation can deal with resistance using love, respect, and wisdom in ecojustice issues. The participants mentioned Peñuelas as an example of this new knowledge for intervention in these complex circumstances inside a congregation. Another similar aspect that this group (PM) like previous focus group (AM) mentioned was the Sarah Peisch experience with the ecojustice leaders. The PM group perceived it like guiding this person to Christ's love in the midst of her illness; meanwhile, they supported their common struggle against contamination in Dorado. The testimony of love from the ecojustice leaders influenced Sarah Peisch's and her family's life.

The insights of understanding the responsibility to care for the earth as a collective one from church service was new for one of the participants. The participant knew about the individual responsibility for caring for the earth but after the classes she understood it as a collective responsibility of the Christian Church. Another participant shared that she did not know about environmental problems in Toa Alta until she began to congregate in our church. At the same time the ecostories became new knowledge for this participant. Other participant previously thought that exterior problems must not be taken inside the church but now, he thinks that we must deal with these problems to help the community. The participants expressed what new knowledge could be applied to them in their particular experience. This was shared with other participants. Some perceived the same idea.

The definition of ecotheology, in the participant's own words, is another valuable contribution to this investigation. Some of the definitions shared in the conversation were: (a) It is the knowledge that God wants human beings to have through studying God's Word about the

coexistence of the creation's different ecosystems, (b) Ecotheology is the process in which the Word of God guides us to care for nature, (c) Ecotheology is a guidance through the Word of God for the correct path to care for nature. All these definitions were forged in the process of self and common reflection on the importance of the responsibility delegated by God to human beings as expressed in the Bible, in Gebara's and Boff's theology and in the four ecostories.

The participants in the PM group mentioned an important aspect of reclaiming the rights of nature and human beings expressed in the conversation. The aspect of the social condition and vulnerable populations that suffer most in the intersections of ecojustice problems was present. It was valuable to hear the participants say that no matter the social condition, all humans should have dignity, rights, and responsibilities. Doing justice for the oppressed human being and the oppressed earth was a part of the conversation that resonates with Boff's theological insights. The people from Toa Alta that live near the Landfill and the Asphalt Plant are not from high middle class nor high class. Sadly, the tendency of locating contaminating sites near vulnerable populations are a constant, not only in Puerto Rico, but also in the United States and other countries in the world. These communities need to organize and fight for their human and ecosystem rights no matter their social condition, as was mentioned in this focus group conversation.

The opportunity to reflect on ecojustice issues together generated the identification of some efforts regarding the Asphalt Plant and the Toa Alta Landfill problems. The participants highlighted that some steps had been taken, not on the scale of the ecostories presented in the classes, but as an ecostory in construction, in process. The efforts that had begun in the Toa Alta congregation included prayer services, letters, visiting the city hall, and being present in one public hearing about the Asphalt Plant. I think that these efforts are part of an important

reflection process and a way to validate the contribution of the Toa Alta congregation as a beginning to opening this aspect of Christian witnessing in the community. The fact that the participants understand that their own ecostory is under construction and needs to be continued, opens a hopeful future for the continuation of accompanying the community in ecojustice issues.

Cultivating Hope

The description of hope, from the perspective of a young participant from our congregation in Toa Alta, captures an ongoing process that forges a vision of a better future for the generations to come, our congregation, and the community. Participant P affirmed:

“I believe this church is cultivating hope, in the Explorers of Creation project for children we are teaching them to recycle, sow trees, not throw garbage, and care for the earth. We teach them a lot of things. This church is cultivating hope for these kids so they cannot repeat the same errors of their parents. I believe that we are sowing hope.”

The voice of this young participant inspired the whole group that immediately affirmed her and talked about the importance of transmitting caring values to children. Some participants shared some experiences with the children correcting their families in recycling and other environmental concepts. Maybe decades ago, our congregation in Toa Alta did not intervene in the Landfill environmental problems, but today it is raising hope in the midst of hopelessness. The important insight about the church cultivating hope must guide us in considering the natural process of this image regarding sowing and reaping. The process is slow. Growing depends on several factors like energy, nutrients, and favorable conditions to develop. The cultivation of hope is an important task in Toa Alta Pueblo and in other churches and communities that suffer environmental problems. Gebara sees hope in Jesus of Nazareth, the one that walked side by side to the vulnerable, the poor, the women, and children. The church, as the body of Christ on Earth, must walk side by side to the vulnerable that live near the Landfill and the Asphalt Plant, the

women and children affected by the gases of the Asphalt Plant in the schools and the community. The church can cultivate hope in younger generations, educate and walk side by side with their community. Restored hope in communities can produce unexpected outcomes to raise justice and to deliver liberation of the oppression from contaminating industries. Cultivating hope is a process of faith and perseverance.

Christian hope is the foundation of the concrete suggested actions and interventions that this PM focus group considered in their conversation. The PM focus group suggested advocacy actions similar to the AM focus group. The difference between AM and PM focus groups was that PM focus group suggested a specific order in which to proceed in helping the community in the Toa Alta ecojustice problems. The order of interventions suggested for ecojustice for the community in the Toa Alta Landfill problem includes:

1. Developing an educative process and then doing other initiatives for the closing of the Landfill.
2. Visiting and hearing the families affected in this ecojustice situations. Assuring them they are not alone and asking what they think we as a church can do to help them.
3. Meeting with the community in a reorganization process including all groups representative of the community so they can have hope in the Landfill situation that affects the water and our health.
4. Accompanying the people in the process of their liberation from the oppression of contamination toward a better quality of life in which health can improve and the ecosystem can heal.
5. Persevering in each advocacy activity and planning must be present.

After examining the conversation and suggested order for this kind of intervention I consider that they reflected on the ecostories and in the Boff ecotheology and Gebara ecotheology. Visiting and hearing the people resonates with the figure of Jesus the Nazareth, the one that brings hope in Gebara's ecofeminism point of view. The description of accompanying people in the process of their liberation is a clear reference to Boff's liberation theology adapted to ecotheological interpretations. I consider that as a researcher, all this new knowledge forged in the Toa Alta context experience of being exposed to ecotheology and ecostories can be shared with other congregations that need to address ecojustice issues in their communities. Congregations that have begun accompanying their communities and others that have not begun such work. One of the reasons can be because perhaps they do not have references or theologically these congregations do not know much about liberation theology and ecotheology. The project provides the opportunity to reproduce the Ecojustice Series lessons that are included in the Appendix as well as other instruments like the questionnaires and ways to collect data from the experience. The trust that the participants deposited in the project process was supported by a series of steps that reassured a confidential participation and a validation process of their contribution.

Evaluation

Validation

All the procedures designed in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol were followed in the interaction with all the churches as organizations that participated in the project and with all the human participants. The orientation and consent form process with the ecojustice leaders transcended my expectations as researcher. The orientation was the beginning of an interesting process of sharing information and personally knowing the hard circumstances of these four

churches and their communities. The ecojustice leaders, who I met in the visits to the four churches brought information, photos, newspaper clippings, letters, ecumenical vigil order, government documents, church flyers inviting to public hearings, workshop flyers to prepare the people to participate, and newsletters prepared by the committees that fought for ecojustice in their communities. I did not expect all this valuable piece of evidence and the willingness that they demonstrated since the beginning, validating their ecostories.

The material that the ecojustice leaders brought me as a researcher served as an important piece in this investigation, especially in the preparation of the four classes on ecojustice and to rescue and reconstruct the ecostories of these communities and churches. After I prepared the classes and the ecostories, I sent each ecostory, each class and its power point presentation to the ecojustice leaders so they could revise and correct whatever they found necessary. The only one that suggested some changes was the Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo church. The other churches did not suggest any changes. This step was very necessary because the protagonists of these stories are the ones that can validate them, and they did it. I greatly appreciate their willingness to cooperate in this process.

The Toa Alta congregation experience provides ways to revise and reflect on the classes by group exercises. The opportunity to have small conversations in the classes opened a way to revise what I, as researcher, presented in each class. An important value in the process of these classes was the opportunity to gather in small groups and talk about what they were learning in each class. Each group had the opportunity to inform what the group had concluded in each exercise. This experience generated ideas of interventions that they understood could be implemented in Toa Alta to cope with the environmental challenges that the community was confronting. This chapter contains some of the ideas and ways of interventions that the Toa Alta

group considered for the Toa Alta environmental reality in the Ecojustice Series Lessons. Cresswell states, “Ethical validation implies that research should also have a generative promise and raise new possibilities, open up new questions, and stimulate new dialogue. Our research must have transformative value leading to action and change.”²³³ I found ethical validation in the process of how the Toa Alta congregation responded to the Ecojustice Lesson Series and how they can generate new ways to handle the environmental problem in their own context. The appreciation that the Toa Alta congregation demonstrated to the four congregations and their ecojustice leaders was repeated constantly in the class exercises and in the two focus group interviews. From the experience in Toa Alta, organized ways of interventions and projections as a church to attend to the ecojustice challenges for the Landfill and for the Asphalt Plant emerged. Ecotheological practices presented in the classes were considered for Toa Alta, not in the same way but in a way the members of the Toa Alta congregation could understand and implement in their own contexts.

The collaborative learning process, with the four churches active in ecojustice and the Toa Alta congregation is a way in which diverse congregations can have different vantage points of similar ecojustice challenges in their communities. The ecostories are a valuable contribution to the environmental history of the Puerto Rican church and also of Puerto Rico. The important contribution of these ecojustice leaders, not only with the documents but also with their living experiences, their wisdom, and their commitment to God, the church and the earth, validate the ecostories and the lessons that I prepared as researcher. In addition, to this significant contribution, the material that I found in the Historical Archives of the Government of Puerto

²³³ John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Second Edition, Thousand Oaks, California, 207-206), 2007.

Rico; newspapers, books, federal, local environmental agencies' documents, legal environmental claim documents, and pamphlets, all helped in bringing different angles to this investigation.

Triangulation

Understanding complex paradigms that collide has never been an easy task. The hard realities that Puerto Rico has lived in the last decades of the past century and in the first decades of this new century has been a great challenge. Colonialism and the power structures that oppress the people and the earth has increased. In each one of the ecojustice struggles the congregations and their communities have confronted serious threats to their health and to their capacity to growth in an integral way. Displaced communities and high rates of illness compromise the economic growth and sustainability of the people that live in more vulnerable areas. In addition, more often communities encounter difficulties to access higher education. This may contribute to a lack of resources accessible for the communities. The factors that intersect in the ecostories and in Toa Alta are interwoven in such a way that they reflect not only on these communities but other communities in Puerto Rico.

Health, racism, ecotheology, economic distress, ecojustice, and colonialism, intersect in these four ecostories and in the Toa Alta ecostory under construction. This intersection confronts the poor nature, oppressive systems, and the church's response in this particular place of mission. Health is part of having good quality of life and a necessity to human societies. The communities that fight for ecojustice comprehend that the environment's health is their health, too. The connection between how we treat the soil, waters, and the earth affect us directly. The high percentage of people with respiratory illness and cancer that live near places that had companies that pollute the earth are a sad reality in Puerto Rico. The high incidence of cancer in Peñuelas,

Arecibo, Dorado, and in Toa Alta are present in each ecostory and in the Toa Alta congregation also. Since I am a pastor in the congregation in Toa Alta, I had to deal with the impact that cancer has on the lives and families of those members of our church. Some had survived; others had passed away. Seven members in a period of seven years had a diagnosis of cancer. Other members of the church had been diagnosed before I arrived to the church and some had overcome this illness. Also, the high incidence of respiratory illness and other conditions in the community that has been exposed for so many years to water and air pollution because of the Toa Alta Landfill and the Asphalt Plant, is a correlation difficult to deny. Betancourt's study found that many contaminants present in the leachate samples of the Toa Alta Landfill had elements that in certain levels could produce cancer and other illnesses in the people exposed. Accumulative exposure to such contaminants is an environmental injustice, though the local government and federal agencies, knew that, for years the community had demanded the closing of these two pollutant facilities. The systemic failure to protect the health of communities affected by industries that pollute and harm the environment has been a pattern in Puerto Rico.

The income of communities affected by environmental problems in Toa Alta and in the four ecostories is not high. This circumstance makes us think about another aspect in the comprehension of these complex ecojustice issues, economic distress, and racism. We had observed that the communities that suffered most, often accepted the industries because they saw it as an employment source, like Espinosa thought at the beginning with the Concrete Plant. The systematic failure continues, and the people with affected health often cannot afford good health care. Finding alternatives for employment and education is also a challenge in Puerto Rico and specially in the communities that struggle for ecojustice.

Racism can be perceived in the lack of some enforcement by the federal agencies like EPA in the Toa Alta Landfill case for example. Puerto Ricans, even when they are American citizens, are Hispanics and they suffer racism like other minorities on the mainland and in our own land. Puerto Ricans, like Native Americans are rejected in their own land. The Puerto Rican people have experienced oppression on their island and the utilization of their land for many years, like the example of Vieques. Without the proper enforcement of local and federal agencies the communities demanded many times that the regulatory agencies fulfill their responsibilities with the communities experiencing injustice.

In the four ecostories we can see the people that were affected in their health, united with these brave churches, taking a stand in fighting for ecojustice in their communities. In all the cases, they do not have the economical, technical, legal, or scientific resources at the beginning of their struggles, but they seek those resources. The ecojustice leaders found ways to raise funds, access organizations like Mission Industrial, the University of Puerto Rico, and other resources to strengthen their fight. The four congregations demonstrated that the church can and must be the ecoliberation center for the community as God is the liberator of the Hebrew people and Jesus is the one that liberates us from the oppression of sin.

Generalizability and Reliability

Reliability of this project can produce more knowledge in the ways we can confront ecojustice problems in affected communities. I understand, as researcher, that this project can be replicated in other congregations that can also learn from these ecostories and for the Toa Alta ongoing ecostory. The Ecojustice Lesson Series is complemented by the ecostories presented in this investigation and the experience in the Toa Alta congregation. The Toa Alta focus groups

demonstrated a productive way in which new knowledge emerged from exposition and reflection on this particular topic of ecojustice. Many churches around the world are experiencing ecojustice challenges in their communities. I understand that the cases of the four ecojustice active churches and the Toa Alta church are immersed in the Caribbean context and specifically in the Puerto Rican context. The “green” lenses, providing the ecotheological considerations for this contextual theology, is a key element that needs to be present. The colonial lenses present in the Puerto Rico reality of being a territory of the United States is another important element. The colonial reality implies hard struggles in many aspects of the Puerto Rican society.

The ecojustice struggles become more complex to the point that we are not the ones that have the last word in our own land. This is another Goliath, the lack of equality for the people with the same citizenship, but different rights. Each fight for ecojustice and the dignity of the land and the people under this colonial circumstance is to be admired and deserves consideration and admiration. This consideration does not mean that we cannot present this project in postcolonial contexts or other contexts, but it is important to not forget where the Series Lesson on Ecojustice was developed and under which “green” and colonial circumstances it emerged. I think that replicating this project in other places can be a valuable contribution to the ongoing struggles for ecojustice that churches confront in their communities. Our times require rereading the Scripture with “green” lenses and reflect on our theology of creation and ecotheology to respond to ecojustice problems that are present in many communities around the world. The church must attend this ongoing and increasing ecojustice challenge in the light of the word of God and in a practical ecotheological approach.

Theological Significance

The concept of community, as theologian during the ecojustice focus group, the classes, and in the Toa Alta focus group, generates a valuable contribution to this investigation. Ecotheology, as a form of revisiting the previous knowledge about creation care in the Bible and in the Boff and Gebara theological grounds, is part of the theological significance of this project. Participant L's insight has an emotive connotation: "The Lord, through his word, talks about creation and through creation he talks to us about love." That love unfolds in care, humility, perseverance, collaborative wisdom, trinity, and the incarnation of Jesus' through the church. Jesus incarnation through the church guides the community in an ecofeminism and detheologizing process that can guide us to consider a practical ecotheology of liberation for our communities.

Humility

Humility is present in the availability and sensitivity of each of the ecojustice leaders to share significant experiences of their Christian journey in caring for the earth in their churches and communities. The capability to share their own experiences under hard and painful circumstances are admirable. Humility is side by side with the bravery and courage that ecojustice leaders demonstrated in standing for people that suffer and die because of pollution. Recognizing each other's efforts and affirming them is a humble Christian attitude. Humbleness, in this context, does not denote feeling less or powerless; contrary to this conception, humbleness is recognizing who God is that guides them, and who are they in God's hands facing such unjust environmental problems. Ecojustice leaders demonstrated humility by approaching the neighbors and people in need, connecting and organizing against the corporation giants that pollute and threaten their communities' health and wellbeing. Humility is also present in Toa Alta's

willingness to learn from other congregation ecostories and consider their own ecojustice problem in light of other brothers' and sisters' experiences. The good acceptance that the Ecojustice Lesson Series had in Toa Alta has the humility attitude component in the experience.

Collaborative Wisdom

Ecojustice leaders shared wisdom from difficult experience interventions with the community, the government, and inside the church. The ecojustice leaders belong to the community as theologian identifying how they, in each of the ecostories, deal with power structures that commit evil in oppressing vulnerable communities. It is interesting how these ecojustice leaders disarticulate agency defenses or government strategies to avoid their responsibilities, but the church was present to dismantle sinful structures that want to oppress people. Boff, in his liberation theology, emphasizes denouncing this deliberate sin that causes harm and suffering to the people and to the earth.

The Toa Alta AM focus group analysis points out that sometimes the government's failure to fulfill its ministerial duty to care for the natural resources is due to ignorance, but other participants point to the colonial Puerto Rican situation and the economic interests that are behind these contaminating projects. Toa Alta PM Focus group deconstructs the colonial and big economic interests as the reasons to what is harming many communities and the environmental and economical carrying capacity in Puerto Rico. Reflecting together on the conversations of all the focus groups and the ecojustice group, the shared wisdom emerged and contributed to the theological significance of this project. Wisdom in the Biblical tradition of the Hebrew Bible is a personification created by God (Proverbs 8) that collaborated in the creation process. In the New Testament, Jesus represents God's wisdom incarnation in collaboration with the Holy Spirit

inspiring and guiding the church to accomplish God's mission on earth. The triune God is present guiding those that want to care for the beautiful creation with wisdom, as is the experience of the congregations in this project.

Ecotheological Conversations

The main example for ecojustice leaders in fighting for justice and the common good for the community was the doctrine of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. This echoes Gebara's links to the hope that Jesus brings to her ecotheology and ecofeminism approach. Ecofeminism has to deal with Jesus because Jesus deals with fundamental aspects that are present in ecofeminism. Jesus began the deconstruction of the patriarchal structures in his rigid Judaic religion and society. Jesus continues offering opportunities for women and the most vulnerable when other systems, including some religious ones try to block them.

The traditions about Jesus of Nazareth deconstructing and reconstructing paradigms resonate with the reconstructionist perspectives of Gebara. The ecojustice leaders revised their knowledge and affirmed the justice aspect of Jesus ministry on Earth. Jesus' claims for justice led the ecojustice leaders toward action in their communities. They had suffered in their own flesh the consequences of environmental pollution. Some of them had lost loved ones to cancer and other illnesses related to environmental contamination in their communities. The one that had suffered on the cross, is the one that inspires them to continue with perseverance and hope that emerges from the most unexpected places. The theology of the cross in the ecojustice leaders' experiences, is present and is a key element in trying to understand their suffering.

The participants mention God and the church as a symbol of the body of Christ, as the One that is present in ecojustice problems who accompanies his people during these endeavors.

God was the most mentioned word in the Toa Alta AM Focus Group, while the most mentioned word in Toa Alta PM Focus Group was church. The implications that this has regarding the evaluation process could be attributed to generation differences of these two groups. How do they approach spirituality in the ecojustice challenges? Considering how they revise their epistemology is part of ecofeminism approach and detheologizing process from Gebara's perspectives.

Ecofeminism and Detheologizing

The invitation to take into consideration a more progressive theological approach in a conservative Protestant tradition is a challenge to the old ways in which the church was understood to behave. The absence of Toa Alta Church participation in previous ecojustice demands from the community to the government was many times attributed to the political partisanship present in the Landfill ecojustice struggles by the community. The ecostories and the ecojustice leaders' accounts describe how they as a church understand the call for justice from the Scripture. Jesus' example of no toleration to corruption and injustice provides a Scriptural and theological frame to reflect on how our congregation in Toa Alta is responding to God's call for justice in the community. How are we following the example of Jesus of Nazareth, as one that brings hope and justice in the middle of uncertainty and degradation? This is a question that emerged in this investigation.

Ecofeminism is not limited to the number of female participants in the investigation. The focus group that had more female participants was the Toa Alta AM Focus Group. The Ecojustice group and the Toa Alta PM Focus Group were more balanced in this female-to-male ratio. Ecofeminism is more related to a form of seeing creation in an integrated way, always open

to reinterpretation of new realities and new knowledge. It is an invitation to rethink our realities and our way of understanding God and religion. Ecofeminism is present in this investigation and in the way the Toa Alta church opened the possibility to rethink their realities and their relationship with the community, especially in ecojustice matters.

The detheologization process that Gebara suggests is part of considering the dynamic forces of life. Christian concepts and doctrines must be examined in the contextual reality of our communities vulnerable to ecojustice problems. Scripture is a valuable guide in caring for the earth and the human being. “Detheologizing” implies revisitation of Christian understandings and deconstruction of the patriarchal and hierarchical structures inside them to be more inclusive and just for others like women, children, and the poor.

In the conversations during the focus groups, I observed how they shared theological concepts that helped them cope with the environmental crisis in their communities. Particularly, Arecibo’s ecojustice leaders talked about how talking about environmentalism inside the church was negative decades ago. Arecibo Ecojustice Leader C was glad to share ecostories of this project in the central offices of the CCDOC denomination in Puerto Rico with the liberty and confidence of not being labelled as a revolutionist or communist. Slow and important progress has been done and needs to continue. Detheologizing the negative perspective of ecclesiastical participation in attending ecojustice community problems has advanced and needs to be continued with the participation of all generations in the church of Puerto Rico. Also from Arecibo, ecojustice leader D described how he particularly had to deal with people that have escapist theologies and a “private faith”. The kind of theologies that promote separation, escapism of reality and the challenges of justice in this world need to be detheologized with the Scriptures, especially, with a Christology that emphasizes the figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ecojustice leaders in Espinosa and Peñuelas that faced resistance to ecojustice efforts inside their congregations, because of conservative theologies that emphasized not merging with the outside world, were detheologizing with Biblical studies and sermons about Christian Stewardship, care, and community approach evangelism. The process of detheologizing was impregnated with love and respect in these congregations.

The Toa Alta focus groups also contributed to the theological reflection that emerged from being confronted with ecojustice challenges in one's community and the ecostories of other communities and congregations. Participant N challenged the concept of the *imago dei* in a genuine statement:

God created us in his image and likeness, and we are not supposed to harm nature. No other animal or natural process harm the environment, only us that have conscience, affect it and destroy it, when we throw the atomic bomb. We must be those who defend it. There is no need to have this unbalance in Creation. Who we are to do all this harm? We are supposed to be creation administrators.²³⁴

This participant brought important theological questions that need to be addressed by Christians. The distorted image of God in the human being had contributed to de-creation of nature and had affected all the created order. The *imago dei* in human beings can be restored in Jesus Christ's redemption plan for humans and all creation as established in Romans 8 where the cosmivision of salvation is expanded beyond the human being. The integral plan of salvation and redemption can restore all things in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1). The impact in us as Christians of reflecting on the *imago dei* can have a reference in the detheologizing process of this Biblical concept.

The *imago dei* includes all human beings and throughout history particular groups in our societies have demonstrated more wisdom than others in caring for the earth. Native Americans are an example as are other groups in our world. Arecibo's Ecojustice Leader C highlighted the

²³⁴ Participant N.

importance of considering how other groups like original tribes care for the earth because they are closer to it. The closeness to the earth and the wisdom that these communities have to share is part of what we need to reconsider in this climate emergency we are experiencing on our planet. Similarly, native Americans in the United States are on their own land, but they do not have the last word in it. Ironically, there is also suffering also from environmental pollution and ecojustice issues when they are the ones that protect the earth more. Distortion of *imago dei* in human beings needs to be restored. Ecojustice Leader C invites us to observe other cultures in which the land is considered sacred like God told Moses and Joshua thousands of years ago.

The *imago dei* in human beings implies care for creation as God designed it. Creation care and the responsibility that we have with it was constantly repeated by the ecojustice leaders and the Toa Alta participants. The ecotheological interpretations of ecojustice leaders and Toa Alta participants mentioned the concept of care more than the concept of stewardship. Creation care is part of Christian stewardship but in the conversations, we observed more frequent use of creation care. Boff emphasizes the ethical care for creation as part of his reflection on ecotheology. Collective Pastoral care was implied and mentioned a few times. Care in Boff's theological comprehension delivers a planetary ethic of care and justice. The Ecojustice Series includes theological concepts from Gebara and Boff. The opportunity to grow in theological reflection together has been a unique experience. Especially reflecting on a specific and pertinent contextual theology like practical ecotheology.

Practical Ecotheology of Liberation

Each church gave us precious examples of practical ecotheology organizing the church and the community to respond to ecojustice issues. The learning and progression of disadvantaged

communities to appropriate their own destiny is an example that we can observe in the ecostories. A Peñuelas ecojustice leader went to the Congress of the United States with other environmental leaders to ask for justice in the case of the toxic ash in Peñuelas. This event encouraged their strength and hope in the midst of their struggles. Espinosa also demanded the right to know the act which would be enforced. Many times, the agencies do not share public documents and the communities need to know what is happening in their surroundings. Knowledge is power and ecojustice leaders know this. Because of the lack of transparency in many instances, from the companies that produce pollution and some governmental agencies, the Espinosa church fought for their rights. Language is also a controversial issue in public hearings with federal agencies because in Puerto Rico the majority of the people speak Spanish. Language is another instrument of power. One of the ecojustice leaders from Espinosa demanded that the EPA meetings be held in Spanish because people would not understand the meeting and that would limit their ability to participate in the process. This claim can be catalogued as another practical ecotheological liberation example. The demand had its effect, and the meeting was suspended and the next year the meeting were held in both languages with translation to Spanish and English. Language can be an instrument of dominion and colonial control, but ecojustice leaders worked for just conditions for all.

Arecibo demonstrated the ecofeminism approach in the “mothers in mourning” march. Dressed in black clothes, these brave women marched in the center of downtown Arecibo calling the attention to the death and sorrow that the incinerator project would bring to their families and the illness to their children and the ones to be born. Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, got united and as David did, they triumphed over the giant that wanted to enslave them by contaminating the community. The community united with the church as one, including all social classes under one

purpose: defending the healthy environment against the big economical and sinful structures that want to degrade it for profit disregarding the health and wellbeing of humans and the river.

Toa Alta identified their initial intentions which was to address the Asphalt Plant and the Landfill environmental problems. Working with younger generations is a way of cultivating hope in a hopeless circumstance. Identifying the small recycling program in the church, the Toa Alta AM Focus Group gave the suggestion to expand this program and educate the community in recycling efforts. I can affirm that epistemology in creation care had increased in the Toa Alta congregation through this project experience. Liberation began at a certain point and I can affirm that the Toa Alta ecostory had begun before this project and they had acknowledged it, named it and affirmed it. Also, I can appreciate their humility to accept the long journey that is ahead of Toa Alta to work for ecojustice in our community. Practical ecotheology of liberation had begun and could expand its influence in Toa Alta participants to develop it in unison with the community. The importance of developing new knowledge and enhancing the ecotheological reflection has been possible by gathering the community as theologians in each focus group interview and in the four classes.

Statement of Significance

The research of the learning process as a collaborative path, brought examples of interventions of the church in ecojustice challenges. Appreciating other's journey one can reflect on our own. More congregations can have references and develop more ecostories that can bring hope in the midst of this kind of suffering and injustice. From the contribution of the ecojustice leaders and the Toa Alta congregation participants we have learned diverse ways to approach ecojustice issues from the church's perspective.

From the collaborative learning process of ecojustice leaders sharing their efforts, patterns of intervention emerged. Specifically, we share the church's intervention pattern in the ecojustice struggles. This pattern consists of twelve steps that were present and common in the four ecostories. The significant contribution of this observed pattern is that other congregations, under similar ecojustice challenges, can examine and reflect on this suggested way of intervention from real ecostories shared by some of their protagonists. Another valuable contribution is the wisdom of sharing ways to cope with resistance to attending ecojustice issues in the community from inside the church. The patterns observed by Peñuelas and Espinosa had similar and particular approaches. The pattern has four steps that describe what functions for this particular congregation in each of their contexts. These patterns are not a guideline or a sequence. For that reason, we share these experiences which should be considered with wisdom and understanding of the vast possibilities to address these kinds of ecojustice problems from within a congregation. The contribution is a valuable one, because many churches confront inside conflicts and we have to attend to this situation. At the same time, we are trying to fulfill God's will to care for creation in the proximity of the church's community. The Toa Alta congregation observed and knew about this through the Ecojustice Series Lesson. From the impact that the ecostories had in the Toa Alta congregation, possible interventions to cope with the Landfill and the Asphalt Plant environmental crisis in Toa Alta emerged.

The Toa Alta focus group identified practices which they have learned through the process of this investigation and suggest an order to make accompanying the community in ecojustice problems possible. The suggested interventions for ecojustice for attending the community in the Toa Alta Landfill problem include five approaches to the community in an

order that allows them to participate with the church in the process of their liberation. The efforts that had begun in Toa Alta could continue with these suggested interventions.

Another scenario is possible for the churches and communities that suffer from environmental problems. Rescuing hope is a significant contribution that ecostories could represent for other congregations in similar ecojustice problems as it was for the Toa Alta congregation. As researcher, one of the words that I will remember is “empowerment” in the words of one of the Toa Alta PM focus group participants when she said: “Pastor this experience has empowered us, we and the church are empowered through this process”. Enlivening learning experiences like this one bring hope and help encourage our people and faith communities in the certainty that God is present. God is operating for the ecojustice liberation of communities that suffer oppression by environmental problems. The capability of imagining other possibilities, and new ways to approach long term environmental problems is part of the contribution of this investigation. The collaborative learning path between the five churches that participated in this project could contribute to congregations that have begun to construct their own ecostory or have not yet begun. There will be another Giant, with another David, but God remains and walks with the people in their needs, operating their liberation with them as protagonists of their own ecostory.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The ecostories presented in this investigation, the ecojustice leaders' willingness to participate and contribute to this project, and the Toa Alta participation were extraordinary. For me, as a researcher and as a pastor, this experience gave me significant lessons about the work that can be done supporting, accompanying, and helping our communities, especially when struggling with ecojustice issues.

The Collaborative Path to Other Churches that Lack Ecojustice in Their Contexts

Interventions and the collaborative path to other churches and communities that lack ecojustice in their contexts can be a contribution of this research. The congregations that had participated, experienced *koinonia*, listening carefully, and sharing their stories related to ecojustice. The collaborative model of learning between churches occurred during this investigation. The Ecojustice leaders learned and compared each other's ecostories affirming similar struggles and circumstances. Together they had learned about brave Christians for whom Jesus is their leadership example addressing ecojustice issues in their communities. In my understanding, Ecojustice leaders and the Toa Alta participants learned from these ecostories that they are not alone, that there are more communities and churches seeking ways to deal with environmental problems, that we can learn from each other and implement in our congregations what best appeals and adapts to our own community and context.

The main question of this research was: What can the CCDOC in Toa Alta learn about ecojustice as it engages with other congregations that are actively advocating in favor of ecojustice? I can conclude that the Toa Alta congregation has learned valuable lessons and has acquired new knowledge to cope with their own ecojustice challenge in the community. The Toa Alta congregation has learned, through the ecostories, that the integration of Christianity in ecojustice issues is part of our call as Christians. A call to care for creation as the Bible, Boff and Gebara's ecotheology teach, was enforced in the four classes. Spiritual practices integrated in the struggles for ecojustice was an example, from the ecostories, that the Toa Alta congregation considered a kind of an evangelism that we were not accustomed to on a regular basis. The presence of the church in community ecojustice issues is the presence of God manifested in the body of Christ's revelation, the church. Considering what the Toa Alta congregation has learned I can affirm that hope and perseverance are an important element in all struggles but especially in ecojustice ones. Faith in God and progress in the fight for ecojustice is possible. The Toa Alta community has been dealing with air, water, and ground contamination by the landfill mismanagement more than forty years and we cannot judge them for feeling hopeless. We can be here for them, so they will understand that as a community they are not alone.

The Toa Alta groups expressed their surprise to know about the Christian leaders (Ecojustice Leaders) that fight for ecojustice in Puerto Rican communities on the island. The Toa Alta congregation learned that congregations smaller than ours had struggled with giants and have prevailed by the grace of God. The Toa Alta congregation has recognized, through this investigation, their own efforts in fighting for ecojustice. Regarding leadership and pastoral care in ecojustice circumstances, the Toa Alta participants shared the key role of pastor and

ecclesiastical leaders in providing security and support to the people and the cause. Toa Alta has learned that the kind of leadership in these complex and conflicting issues is an adaptative leadership that uses wisdom in its decisions. The Toa Alta church also learned from ecojustice leaders that it is possible to deal with resistance inside the church, using wisdom, respect, and love for those that think differently or that work for the contaminating industries. The ecostories that confronted resistance shared how they dealt with it by providing pastoral care for those who were in the process of comprehending the responsibility of the church as stewards and keepers of God's creation.

The Toa Alta congregation has learned, from ecojustice leaders, a pattern to follow to make interventions on ecojustice issues in their communities. They knew and reconstructed the pattern in the conversations in the focus groups. Even as they identify steps and ways to intervene, they have reflected together and constructed their own intervention pattern for addressing the landfill environmental problems and the Asphalt Plant problem from the new knowledge acquired. Acquiring this new knowledge and process it between churches was one of the purposes of this research. Toa Alta has learned, from congregations actively advocating in favor of ecojustice, new patterns of intervention for the community and also for within the church. The Toa Alta congregation has learned about leadership and about pastoral collective care to communities that suffer environmental problems. The Toa Alta congregation has learned valuable lessons illustrated in this investigation from the church's ecostories and from the ongoing ecostory of Toa Alta.

Ecojustice interventions are efforts that bring hope amid the challenges for ministry in the 21st century. The moments that bring and affirm hope in ecojustice struggles are the achievements and victories. The intersection of colonialism, environmental racism, economic

hardships, and the lack of access to health providers is a present challenge in the Puerto Rican context. The victories and achievements are a great motivation but also a sign to be aware of contaminating industries that plan to establish themselves in the community. Progress in the struggle also encourages the participants and helps to reconstruct hope in the minds and hearts that had been devastated decades ago. Organization and proposals for change motivate the people and can guide them to act in favor of ecojustice in Toa Alta's reality. There is no small progress in ecojustice struggles: a truth that Toa Alta participants and I, as a researcher, have learned in this investigation.

Challenges are always present, and I consider two important factors that deserve attention and action. First, I present my concern with how we integrate younger generations in the ecojustice challenges in our communities. The majority of the generations involved in the ecojustice struggles were Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and a few Millennials. This is the order of percentages of participation in the investigation. There is a lot of work to do in this area to invite younger generations for integration to concerns with climate change and ecojustice in their communities.

Another challenge that I consider must be addressed is inserting the ecotheology course in the official curriculum of the Master of Divinity degree. Pastors in our present time will encounter communities with complex environmental problems that are systemic problems more often, and this is not an easy task. New pastors need to be equipped with a basic guideline to how to deal with ecojustice problems in their communities from a practical ecotheological perspective. Including the ecotheology class in Master of Divinity curriculum in the theological seminaries that prepare pastors is key so as to be pertinent as the church in the time and context that we live in now.

Sustainability

In a strategic planning process at two retreats in January 2020, one of the members of Toa Alta congregation, mentioned our participation in attending the environmental problems of the community and also how we can include being a congregation that cares for the earth from our actions on a daily basis. The strategic planning process and other projects are in a pause mode until the congregation can gather as before the Covid-19 pandemic. The children's program of Creation's Explorers had continued in a virtual mode and children from some states and from Colombia have participated in the experience through social media. I hope that the seed of ecojustice, with the possible interventions accompanying the community, can produce in time concrete efforts to bring justice for the people and for the earth in Toa Alta and in other communities that need it.

Ecclesial Significance

The investigation provides an example of humility for other faith communities in the disposition of congregations to learn from each other. Humbleness in a collective form is not so easy to identify, but with the contributions and attitudes of all the congregations that participated in the investigation I can conclude, from the perspective of the researcher, that this Christian virtue was expressed in all five congregations and it was tangible and real in the focus group interviews as in the classes, also. The ecojustice leaders want to share the classes in their congregations because they want their churches to know about other ecostories also. I hope to contribute to these leaders and their congregations with the Ecojustice Lesson Series in Spanish.

The scope from the Toa Alta church, to attend the ecojustice problem in the community continues throughout the Lesson Series in Ecojustice. In one of the exercises during the classes a

proposal emerged to create a committee in church that can work with the community on issues related with ecojustice. This could be a significant contribution to the structural organization of the congregation. A formal team working as a bridge between the community and the church is a progress to achieve the possible interventions for the community that the Toa Alta AM, and PM focus group suggested. All the practical ecotheology on interventions suggested in the classes and the Toa Alta focus groups demonstrated the attention and importance that the participants of the study had. I hope that the Toa Alta participants' ideas could be a continuation to the initial efforts that had begun in Toa Alta before the project. They reflected on their own reality and context as a congregation in a community affected by a long period of environmental problems.

The ecostories of the four congregations and their implications had an impact in the Toa Alta congregation that moved them to think in a broader perspective than they had done and what they can do in the present and future for being pertinent as a church in the community. I can appreciate the ecclesial significance by proposing concrete actions to address the environmental problems of the landfill and the asphalt plant in a more concerted, serious, and organized way.

Theological Significance

This investigation suggested a variety of theological implications on different levels. Theological implications for the ecojustice leaders, in revising their ecotheological interpretations and reaffirming their beliefs is an important part of this investigation. This reaffirmation came from the experience of contemplating other struggles for ecojustice grounded on Biblical and ethical requirements of each Christian and the church. Theological implications for Toa Alta members include their own reflection as to what they are doing in their families to care for the earth, and how they can cope with environmental problems from the family's perspective.

Pastoral leadership, in envisioning a future of being more active in caring for creation, includes strengthening the actual programs that the Toa Alta congregation had begun. As we progress in the vision, we as church members must have the will to motivate many hopeless feelings of some members of the community and the church. The recycling program, the Energetic Oasis, and the Biblical Children practical ecotheology program need to have continuation so that the suggested interventions for addressing the ecojustice landfill problem can be included. Another way to direct efforts to follow the pattern that Toa Alta suggested is to strengthen the Christian education program. Knowing more about ecotheology, ecofeminism, liberation theology, and practical ecotheology needs to be a path walked with the congregation. Boff and Gebara's theological contribution to this investigation has reinforced and empowered the Biblical concept of caring for creation that the Toa Alta church uses and understands better than other concepts. The learning process is a continuous one and needs to be planned with a vision to address the ecojustice issues in the community.

I learned many valuable lessons during this investigation, lessons about believing and having hope against hopelessness, lessons about faith through tough circumstances. I learned, once again, about God's fidelity in the midst of complex challenges affecting people's lives and the environment. I have learned how great a congregation can be that trusts in God's intervention in the ecojustice problems that affect their community. I appreciated the humility as a virtue of ecojustice leaders and Toa Alta participants in sharing their experiences and being open to change their way of thinking on certain controversial issues concerning ecojustice and community participation. Through the ecojustice leaders God taught me during the process of framing each ecostory in this project. I have learned about perseverance and real commitment with God's Kingdom and its justice through the church's interventions, supporting the

community in these ecostories. I have learned from my local congregation in Toa Alta, to recognize that there is no small effort when we fight for ecojustice in our communities being guided by God's word. I have learned not to minimize the efforts done even if the problem is not yet solved. I learned about the power of God over evil power structures in this world. I learned that as David prevailed in Goliath's challenge and obtained the victory through faith in God, we can do the same. We as a church with faith in the same God can achieve the victory over companies that are contaminating and degrading our air, ground, water, and health. I also learned from the ecojustice leaders that Christian practical ecotheological education is a slow process and we must remain loyal to God's purpose for all creation. I have learned from my local church of their commitment with environmental issues affecting the people and the ecosystem. The opportunity to talk about the environmental problems that affect the community in Toa Alta was transforming. Conversations in the classes and the focus groups provided interventions and excellent ideas about organization in addressing these kinds of issues.

The church's religious leadership in the community was an important element in strengthening the community's fight for ecojustice. During the focus group interview ecojustice leaders repeated the importance and key role of the pastor in leading the congregation to support the community. The leadership that requires complex dynamics inside and outside a congregation is a wise one. Wisdom is necessary, especially when resistance against involving the church with ecojustice issues, emerges from the congregations. Adaptive leadership can help navigate through complex conflicts in church and community. An adaptive leadership style can give space to the church leaders to consolidate work with the community and progress in a slow but firm path toward ecojustice for all.

Pastoral leadership, in environmental challenges in the community, involves pastoral care to the physically ill and to the emotionally affected by the injustices of the oppressive systems that harm nature. The intense and prolonged struggles for ecojustice in the communities can generate compassion fatigue in some community and church members involved. Pastoral leadership must consider this vantage point to bring spiritual and emotional support.

Ecojustice leaders gave the impression that their work had been recognized and the effort they had done for the wellbeing of the community had been validated. Toa Alta participants noted the changes regarding previous conceptions related to the church's participation on ecojustice challenges that affect the community. Recognizing their own efforts for ecojustice as a church was an amazing experience. There is a phrase that echoes in my mind: "Pastor, this process has empowered us." The enlivening attitude of the Toa Alta AM and PM focus groups had motivated me to continue in this ecotheological leadership role for the church and the community. They motivated and suggested to me as a pastor, to continue these studies that are so necessary for the church.

The paradigm that only big congregations can carry out significant roles and achievements was deconstructed. The reality is that small congregations can do great things and achieve significant victories for the community as the ecostories reflect. Ecojustice leaders' churches are diverse, small or big congregations and in all of them the Toa Alta congregation saw the great efforts for the wellbeing of the community and creation regardless the size of the congregation.

The presence of God was perceived by me in multiple ways in this research process. The harmony affirming atmosphere was present in the ecojustice focus group interview. There were special moments in the process of sharing the ecostories that moved us not only emotionally, but

I can say in a spiritual way. I perceived a special admiration of the efforts presented in the ecostories. Also, I appreciated the acquaintance of new knowledge and the revision that the participants made in what our local congregation had done and what it can do for the community regarding environmental problems. The Toa Alta congregation revised the epistemology of creation relations with human conceptions and the new knowledge that emerged from the process. This new knowledge invites us to theological reflection and to detheologizing concepts to renew our understandings in the light of the Bible and of Boff and Gebara's ecotheology. All the research experience had enriched the lives of the ones that had participated and opened their minds to consider new possibilities in the midst of complex challenges for ecojustice.

Unexpected outcomes

During the process of completing the data collection process, opportunities have emerged from the denomination and other churches to share what we are doing. I offered a conference for all the pastors of the CCDOC in Puerto Rico at the ministers' meeting about climate change and the church in October 2019. This was the first time in eighteen years since I am a Disciples of Christ Pastor that an entire pastor's meeting is dedicated completely to environmental concerns in climate change and practical ecotheology. The resolution committee of the Disciples of Christ denomination in Puerto Rico invited me to collaborate in the redaction of the Resolution for the Convention (General Assembly) of the CCDOC in Puerto Rico that was approved in the convention of February 2020, hoping that this resolution can guide local congregations toward concrete plans and actions in favor of ecojustice on our island.

The Associate Pastor in Christian Education asked me to write a class for the CCDOC in Puerto Rico for the Sunday Biblical Lessons Book About Environmental Stewardship in summer

2019. I thought that these kinds of experiences and opportunities would come when I finished the DMin project, but they arrived early and because there are not so common, I decided to do extra effort to contribute to the progress of ecotheological awareness in Puerto Rico. Another unexpected outcome has been the relationship that the ecojustice leaders and I have maintained. One of the Ecojustice leaders from Espinosa wrote a book related to the richness of nature in the region. I invited her to present her book in our church in Toa Alta Pueblo in August 2019. In this activity other participants of the project came with her to our church, and we invited the community of Toa Alta for that event. This was an important event in which people gathered to know more about their environmental richness of the Toa bioregion.

In January 2020 we had 6.4 earthquake in the south of Puerto Rico. Many houses were damaged by the earthquake. I called the Pastor of the UECT in Peñuelas to reach out for the people there, because they are near the epicenter. The pastor told me that everyone was fine but one of the ecojustice leaders lost her home because of the earthquake. The church in Toa Alta collected a special offering, visited the church and gave this special offering to help our sister in Christ. The Pastor and the members of the church were glad and grateful to receive a visit from the north of the Island. We visited them in February 2020. We shared the service together. It is a blessing how the relations and connections with God and creation continue in a supportive way.

The ecojustice leaders in Espinosa sent me photos of a presentation that they offered to the board of their church sharing their experience in our project and showing the Power Point presentation of the lesson prepared from Espinosa. This presentation was in March 2020 and the ecojustice leader testified that it was a significant moment and the church appreciated seeing their own ecostory as a lesson to share with others. After Christmas 2019, we began with a project to make a strategic plan for our Toa Alta Church for the next five years and the ecojustice

aspect will be present with the ideas that the members of the church shared that we can do in our community. We have two retreats to begin working with this planning, but the events in Puerto Rico and in the world have delayed these plans. Our church facilities have been closed since March 15, 2020 and we do not have a date yet for the reopening for now. Even when the church facilities are closed the church has continued working and we made an alliance with an environmental organization named *El Puente Enlace Latino de Acción Climática* and we are beginning a project named “Energetic Oasis” in which the kitchen of our church can be connected to solar panels and batteries, assuring that in case of a disaster or hurricane the refrigerator of the church will function and we can serve the community keeping some medicines that require lower temperatures and charge laptops and cell phones in case of power loss. This is a way we can serve the community and educate also in energy efficiency and climate change.

Cultivating Hope in the Midst of Environmental Hardships

Cultivating is an ongoing process that requires care, consistency, and faith. When the Toa Alta participants affirmed that we were cultivating hope in our congregation we were moved. One participant had experienced, years ago, the environmental problem of the Asphalt Plant odors in the school. She had experienced school eviction because of the contamination problem with children affecting children’s health. These participants had seen the efforts that our congregation in Toa Alta had done as a significant support. This insight and the fact as to how she perceived it, invited me to reflect on how, as a pastor, I thought that we were only making small efforts, but from her perspective it is not an effort but a process that needs care, consistency, and faith; a cultivating hope process that we had begun in Toa Alta and that we must continue. There are real

possibilities to address the landfill environmental crisis and the Asphalt Plant contamination problem in the interventions suggested by the Toa Alta participants.

More Questions Arise and Other Project Ideas

How do we lead a practical ecotheology in the local church? How can we develop a practical ecotheology program to the church's younger generations? How do we create a Christian environmental or ecojustice coalition in Puerto Rico? More and more questions can emerge from the results of this investigation. An ecumenical Christian environmental coalition does not exist in Puerto Rico that we know of. This effort could help in supporting communities with ecojustice threats. Another question that emerges is: How do we deal with change in ecotheological conceptions in the conservative congregations of Puerto Rico? Thinking about liturgy, another area for research can be gathering a collection of autochthonous hymns on ecotheological reflections about God and nature. This research can reveal the ecotheology behind the composition of Christian hymns in Puerto Rico's church.

I wonder how the impact of the Four Lesson series on Ecojustice would be if the ecojustice leaders were the ones who present the ecostories and not the researcher. It can be an interesting vantage point to observe. Thinking of my denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico, I envision a convention or general assembly in which the ecojustice leaders can participate in a panel and share their experiences to the denomination in ways that they can reinforce Christian education on ecojustice and stewardship that is so important in our contexts and reality.

The validation of this type of integral incarnate evangelism can be a significant testimony to many leaders present in our assemblies and a way to support local efforts in these kinds of

challenges in our communities. Seeing leaders that have walked the path of ecojustice can inspire younger generations to do the same.

Ecojustice ecostories can be part of a broader project of recollecting more ecostories from other churches in Puerto Rico and contribute to the church and environmental history in Puerto Rico. Knowing how the church has intervened and is intervening in past, present, and future environmental challenges in Puerto Rico can help to create a map of this concerted work between church and the community on ecojustice problems. Vieques' problematic environmental history can be researched to know the intervention of the local churches in the fight for justice and dignity of the people and the land in Vieques. Supporting each other's efforts of on ecojustice issues, conservation efforts, and caring for the environment can enhance the church's testimony of love and compassion for all creation.

Personal Significance

This project has been a significant journey and a longing for a more sustainable and just world for all. This long journey has brought me to the point in which I have the opportunity to make this project on how Christian churches can accompany the community that suffers environmental problems, specifically, in the congregation that I have served eight years in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, and other places on Earth, there are communities that have struggled or are struggling with health and security problems due to unjust processes and economic interests that are above the wellbeing of people and the ecosystem. This project was a dream for me, a vision that I had years ago, but I waited for but the right time, the right place with the right people to arrive. I am grateful for the time that I had to wait, learn, read, and to fulfill this accomplishment, until now. As a pastor I feel more responsible in guiding the possibilities envisioned by the Toa

Alta participants with attention to the landfill environmental crisis and the Asphalt Plant contamination in the community. I feel honored to be a part of this project on ecojustice and the church and I am compelled to continue this journey with my local congregation and other places in which I can serve with God's help. As a person who seeks to serve God, I am glad that this investigation can contribute to the church and environmental history of Puerto Rico. There are many other ecostories to know about and many ecotheological practical challenges to address in Puerto Rico and in the whole world that God has created



APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT DOCUMENTS

**Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas**

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Eco-Justice Group

- 1. Title of Research:** Stories of Hope: Interventions of the Church in Ecojustice Challenges and the Path to Address the Toa Alta Landfill Environmental Crisis

Principal Investigator: Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson

Co-investigators: Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years old or older and be a member of a Christian church in Puerto Rico. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Things you should know:

- This is a research study involving human subjects that has been approved by the TCU Institutional Review Board.
- The purpose of the study is to collect ecostories of hope from congregations already involved in ecojustice challenges. These church's experiences, strategies, and interventions will be shared with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo that will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to be part of a focus group interview to describe your congregation's involvement in an environmental problem in your community. In this interview you will participate with other leaders from four congregations; the interview will be held in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) headquarters in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. This interview will take approximately one and a half hour to two hours.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include revisiting environmental injustices inflicted to vulnerable populations that can bring sadness to the participants.
- The study will provide valuable information for other congregations that face environmental problems in Puerto Rico and who need a reference to deal with this kind

- of challenge in their communities. Participating in this study can help in create a collaborative learning process between churches about eco-justice in Puerto Rico.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the purpose of the research? The purpose is learning how to understand eco-justice challenges from churches that have been involved in dealing with such problems in their communities in a way that can bring models and examples for other churches that are in similar situations and do not know how to begin to address the challenge.

The objective of this research is to investigate how the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta can deepen it's understanding of ecojustice issues affecting the community. For this objective, this research intends to explore different ways in which selected churches in Puerto Rico face environmental challenges and how they ought to show care and concern about such issues. Through this process of collaborative learning, the project aims to learn about eco-justice and the opportunities it might produce when the community faces environmental challenges.

The expectation is to demonstrate that there are interventions and opportunities present and pertinent as a Christian church in the environmental challenges that communities face. What can the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, learn about eco-justice as it engages leaders from other congregations that are also actively advocating in favor of eco-justice? The environmental issues and the communities that suffer because of contamination are increasing around the world. The church can contribute to the wellbeing of their communities being present and collaborating in their struggles for creation care and the people that suffer because of these problems.

How many people will participate in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of 55 to 60 participants in this research study.

What is my involvement for participating in this study?

If you agree to be in the study, we will ask you to do the following things:

Be part of a focus group interview that can last an hour and a half to two hours. In this interview, you will be one of three leaders from your congregation that will share experiences of your church's involvement in environmental challenges in the church's community. That focus group interview will have leaders from three other churches that have been also involved in these complex environmental issues. The knowledge and wisdom that you can share from your own experiences in that interview will be shared by the graduate student in a four-lesson series at the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. Your participation will only be in the focus group interview. The information that you provide will be used for research purposes and your name and identity will be protected and confidential.

Environmental problems are complex. The focus group interview will have questions that you will have the time to answer before we begin the interview conversation. You can take time to answer

the questions in the paper we will provide to you and you will be able to have it in the interview conversation. When the interview is finished, you will give to the graduate student the paper with your answers. The paper will include a demographical part information in which you have not to put your name and a part for the ecojustice questions. For example, one of the questions for the focus group interview will be:

1. Do you consider responding to environmental challenges an aspect of your faith as a Christian?
2. If your church is responding to the issues named, are they finding ways to engage with the surrounding community in their responses?

How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?

You will be required to be in a focus group interview for an hour and a half to two hours for one day only.

What are the risks to me for participating in this study and how will they be minimized?

There are some risks you might experience from being in this study. They are feeling sad because of environmental injustices that are becoming more frequent and are harming people and ecosystems. This risk will be minimized by focus on the support that each congregation there represents for the ones that suffer. Another precaution is to facilitate contact information for counseling. We don't believe there are other risks from participating in this research that are different from risks that you encounter in everyday life.

We will ask the participants to give back the interview paper folded, and we will keep that papers and the video card in a secure place and will be viewed only for the research process.

What are the benefits for participating in this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because this study in Puerto Rico is one of the first dealing with ecojustice from the perspective of the Christian church. We hope other churches can benefit from the insights, experiences, interventions, and strategies of the churches that have been involved in ecojustice issues. You might benefit from being in this study because you can learn from leaders from other congregations interested in creation care. Society can benefit because congregations are inserted in communities that are exposed to environmental problems and can contribute to address these kinds of problems in these Climate Change times.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?

If you come from Arecibo o Peñuelas towns you will receive a payment of \$30 for gas expenses, because you will come far to the interview location in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. For those participants from Dorado and Guaynabo, that come near the Bayamon area, they will receive \$20 for gas expenses.

What are the costs to you to be a part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will not need to pay for parking or any snack.

Who can profit from study results?

Nobody can be profit from this study.

What is an alternative procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?

Supporting efforts addressing environmental challenges in our communities.

How will my confidentiality be protected? – We plan to publish the results of this study. Effort will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Your records may be reviewed by authorized university or other individuals who will be bound by the same provisions of confidentiality.

What will happen to the information collected about me after the study is over?

We will keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project. Your name will not be asked in the questionnaires or in the interview questions sheet, only demographic data will be asked. Other documents like this consent document that can directly identify you will be kept secure in the Pastoral Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as well as in the graduate student home in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The video records will be confidential information to be used only for research purposes. The video footage will be safely stored in the Pastoral Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico as well as in the graduate student home in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We may share your research data with other investigators without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Is my participation voluntary?

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of this study, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, then you have to notify the graduate student. All volunteers that fill the consent document to participate can withdraw at any moment from the study by calling or emailing the graduate student or by a personal conversation. The participant's data information who decides to withdraw from the study will be destroyed or deleted and will not be considered for the study purposes. Your participation can be cancelled if your conduct is inadequate for this environment of respect and dignity to all people involved in the research.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?

You can contact Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira at sary.rosario@tcu.edu and 787 478-0793 with any questions that you have about the study.

Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?

Dr. Michael Faggella-Luby, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, (817) 257-4355, m.faggella-luby@tcu.edu; or Ms. Lorrie Branson, JD, TCU Research Integrity Officer, (817) 257-4266, l.branson@tcu.edu.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. A copy also will be kept with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

 Printed Subject Name

 Signature

 Date

 Printed Name of person obtaining consent

 Signature

 Date

Consent to be audio/video recorder

I agree to be audio/video recorded. Yes _____ No _____

 Signature

 Date

Consent to Use Data for Future Research

I agree that my information may be shared with other researchers for future research studies that may be similar to this study or may be completely different. The information shared with other researchers will not include any information that can directly identify me. Researchers will not contact me for additional permission to use this information.

Yes _____ No _____

 Signature

 Date

Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future projects. Yes _____ No _____

 Signature

 Date



Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Toa Alta Group

Title of Research: Stories of Hope: Interventions of the Church in Eco-Justice Challenges and the Path to Address the Toa Alta Landfill Environmental Crisis

Principal Investigator: Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson

Co-investigators: Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years old or older and be a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo, Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Things you should know:

- This is a research study involving human subjects that has been approved by the TCU Institutional Review Board.
- The purpose of the study is to collect ecostories of hope from congregations already involved in eco-justice challenges. These church's experiences, strategies, and interventions will be shared with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo that will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to be in a lesson series four Sundays and be part of a focus group interview to reflect in what we can learn about other congregations' experiences in environmental problems. In this interview you will participate with church members. The interview will be held after the four-lesson series in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo, Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. This interview will take approximately one hour and a half to two hours.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include revisiting environmental injustices inflicted to vulnerable populations that can bring sadness to the participants.
- The study will provide valuable information for other congregations that face environmental problems in Puerto Rico and who need a reference to deal with this kind of challenge in their communities. Participating in this study can help in create a collaborative learning process between churches about eco-justice in Puerto Rico.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the purpose of the research? The purpose is learning how to understand eco-justice challenges from churches that have been involved in dealing with such problems in

their communities in a way that can bring models and examples for other churches that are in similar situations and do not know how to begin to address the challenge.

The objective of this research is to investigate how the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta can deepen its understanding of ecojustice issues affecting the community. For this objective, this research intends to explore different ways in which selected churches in Puerto Rico face environmental challenges and how they ought to show care and concern about such issues. Through this process of collaborative learning, the project aims to learn about eco-justice and the opportunities it might produce when the community faces environmental challenges.

The expectation is to demonstrate that there are interventions and opportunities present and pertinent as a Christian church in the environmental challenges that communities face. What can the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, learn about eco-justice as it engages leaders from other congregations that are also actively advocating in favor of eco-justice? The environmental issues and the communities that suffer because of contamination are increasing around the world. The church can contribute to the wellbeing of their communities being present and collaborating in their struggles for creation care and the people that suffer because of these problems.

How many people will participate in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of 55 to 60 participants in this research study.

What is my involvement for participating in this study?

If you agree to be in the study, we will ask you to do the following things:

Be part of a four-lesson series four Sundays and fill out the same questionnaire before and after the lesson series. Then if you want you can participate in a focus group interview that can last an hour and a half to two hours after the series were completed. In this interview you will be with other Toa Alta church members to reflect on the ecostories that were shared by congregations in the lesson series. The information that you provide will be used for research purposes and your name and identity will be protected and confidential.

Environmental problems are complex. The focus group interview will have questions that you will have the time to read and write your comments before we begin the interview conversation. You can take time to answer the questions in the paper we will provide to you and you will be able to have it in the interview conversation. When the interview is finished, you will give to the graduate student the paper with your answers. The document will have a demographical section and another part including the environmental questions. You do not have to write your name in this paper. For example, one of the questions for the focus group interview will be:

1. Is there one of the congregations studied whose efforts you admire and why?
2. Do you think differently about the church's responsibility toward environmental problems than you did before this study?

How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?

You will be required to be in the lesson series that will be given in the Sunday morning service and a week after in a focus group interview for one and a half hours to two hours. The total approximately time required with the lessons and the interview will be 7 hours.

What are the risks to me for participating in this study and how will they be minimized?

There are some risks you might experience from being in this study. These includes feeling sad because of environmental injustices that are becoming more frequent and are harming people and ecosystems. This risk will be minimized by focus on the support that each congregation there represents for the ones that suffer. Another precaution is to facilitate contact information for counseling. We don't believe there are other risks from participating in this research that are different from risk that you encounter in everyday life.

We will ask the participants to give back the interview paper folded, and we will keep that papers and the video card in a secure place and will be viewed only for the research process.

What are the benefits for participating in this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because this study in Puerto Rico is one of the first dealing with ecojustice from the perspective of the Christian church. We hope other churches can benefit from the insights, experiences, interventions, and strategies of the churches that have been involved in ecojustice issues. You might benefit from being in this study because you can learn from leaders from other congregations interested in creation care. Society can benefit because congregations are inserted in communities that are exposed to environmental problems and can contribute to address these kinds of problems in these Climate Change times.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?

You will have snacks after the focus group interview.

What are the costs to you to be a part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will not need to pay for parking or any snack.

Who can profit from study results?

Nobody can be profit for this study.

What is an alternative procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?

Supporting the efforts to addressing environmental challenges in our community.

How will my confidentiality be protected? – We plan to publish the results of this study. Effort will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Your records may be reviewed by authorized university or other individuals who will be bound by the same provisions of confidentiality.

What will happen to the information collected about me after the study is over?

We will keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project. Your name will not be asked in the questionnaires or in the interview questions sheet, only demographic data will be asked. Other documents like

this consent document that can directly identify you will be kept secure in the Pastoral Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as well as in the graduate student home in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The video records will be confidential information to be used only for research purposes. The video footage will be safely stored in the Pastoral Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico as well as in the graduate student home in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We may share your research data with other investigators without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Is my participation voluntary?

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of this study, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer questions that you do not feel comfortable. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, then you have to notify the graduate student. All volunteers that fill the consent document to participate can withdraw at any moment from the study by calling or emailing the graduate student or by a personal conversation. The participant's data information who decide to withdraw from the study will be destroyed or deleted and will not be considered for the study purposes. Your participation can be cancelled if your conduct is inadequate for this environment of respect and dignity to all people involved in the research.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?

You can contact Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira at sary.rosario@tcu.edu and 787 478-0793 with any questions that you have about the study.

Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?

Dr. Michael Faggella-Luby, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, (817) 257-4355, m.faggella-luby@tcu.edu; or Ms. Lorrie Branson, JD, TCU Research Integrity Officer, (817) 257-4266, l.branson@tcu.edu.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. A copy also will be kept with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature

Date

Printed Name of person obtaining consent

Signature

Date

Consent to be audio/video recorder

I agree to be audio/video recorded. Yes _____ No _____

Signature

Date

Consent to Use Data for Future Research

I agree that my information may be shared with other researchers for future research studies that may be similar to this study or may be completely different. The information shared with other researchers will not include any information that can directly identify me. Researchers will not contact me for additional permission to use this information.

Yes _____ No _____

Signature

Date

Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future projects. Yes _____ No _____

Signature

Date

Recruitment Letters:

- I. First Group: Eco-Justice Group
Sample letter for the Board of Trustees of the four congregations:

Mm/dd/YYYY

Board of Trustees
Church's name

Grace and peace from Jesus Christ. I am writing to invite your church to be part of a research study related with how congregations support and help their communities when they face environmental problems. The principal investigator is Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson from the Texas Christian University and the co-investigator is Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira. The university is located in Fort Worth Texas, but the study will be conducted in Puerto Rico.

The study will consist in the participation of three leaders of your congregation that had been involved actively in supporting and helping the community in the struggles for ecojustice in an environmental problem that had affected the community in the past or that is affecting it now. These three leaders will participate with other leaders of other congregations in a focus group interview related to their experiences in these issues.

The purpose of this investigation is collecting these ecostories of hope and share the experiences, strategies, and interventions with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo that will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you have questions you can communicate with Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira 787 478-0793.

I will give follow up to this invitation. If you decide to participate, just let me know by letter to this direction: Calle 12 NO # 1341, Puerto Nuevo, San Juan, PR or send your letter by email sary.rosario@tcu.edu Thank you for your time. God bless you!

In Christ,

Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira
Doctor in Ministry Student
Brite Divinity School
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas, US

Sample Letter for the Leaders of the Eco-justice Group

Mm/dd/YYYY

Leader's name
Church's name

Grace and peace from Jesus Christ. I am writing to invite you to be part of a research study related with how congregations support and help their communities when they face environmental problems. The principal investigator is Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson from the Texas Christian University and the co-investigator is Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira. The university is located in Fort Worth Texas, but the study will be conducted in Puerto Rico.

The study will consist in the participation of three leaders of your congregation that had been involved actively in supporting and helping the community in the struggles for ecojustice in an environmental problem that had affected the community in the past or that is affecting it now. These three leaders will participate with other leaders of other congregations in a focus group interview related to their experiences in these issues. I invite you to be one of these three leaders from your congregation to participate in this focus group interview. Your participation will be voluntary, and you must be 18 or older to be allowed to participate.

The purpose of this investigation is collecting these ecostories of hope and share the experiences, strategies, and interventions. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you have questions you can communicate with Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira 787 478-0793.

I will give follow up to this invitation. If you decide to participate, just let me know by a phone call or by letter to this direction: Calle 12 NO # 1341, Puerto Nuevo, San Juan, PR or send your letter by email sary.rosario@tcu.edu Thank you for your time. God bless you!

In Christ,

Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira
Doctor in Ministry Student
Brite Divinity School
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas, US

II. Second Group: Toa Alta Congregation Group
 Sample letter for the Board of Trustees of the Toa Alta Congregation

Mm/dd/YYYY

Board of Trustees
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Toa Alta Pueblo,
 Toa Alta, PR

Grace and peace from Jesus Christ. I am writing to invite your church to be part of a research study related with how congregations support and help their communities when they face environmental problems. The principal investigator is Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson from the Texas Christian University and the co-investigator is Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira. The university is located in Fort Worth Texas, but the study will be conducted in Puerto Rico.

The study for the Toa Alta congregation will consist in the presentation of four lessons about the churches that have been supporting their communities when they had face environmental problems. The entire congregation will receive these lessons. The church's members that want to participate in the investigation will fill a consent document and before and after the four lessons they will answer a questionnaire that will be the same at the beginning and at the end of the process. When the lesson series end there will be two focus groups interviews with 12 to 15 persons each of them with the participants that wants to share what they had learned through this process. All the participants must have 18 years old or more.

The purpose of this investigation is collecting these ecostories of hope and share the experiences, strategies, and interventions. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you have questions you can communicate with Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira 787 478-0793.

I will give follow up to this invitation. If you decide to participate, just let me know by a phone call or by letter to this direction: Calle 12 NO # 1341, Puerto Nuevo, San Juan, PR or send your letter by email sary.rosario@tcu.edu Thank you for your time. God bless you!

In Christ,

Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira
 Doctor in Ministry Student
 Brite Divinity School
 Texas Christian University
 Fort Worth, Texas, US

Sample letter for the members of the Toa Alta Congregation

Mm/dd/YYYY

Member of the Church
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Toa Alta Pueblo,
Toa Alta, PR

Grace and peace from Jesus Christ. I am writing to invite you to be part of a research study related with how congregations support and help their communities when they face environmental problems. The principal investigator is Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson from the Texas Christian University and the co-investigator is Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira. The university is located in Fort Worth Texas, but the study will be conducted in Puerto Rico.

The study for the Toa Alta congregation will consist in the presentation of four lessons about the churches that have been supporting their communities when they had face environmental problems. The entire congregation will receive these lessons. The church's members that want to participate in the investigation will fill a consent document and before and after the four lessons they will answer a questionnaire that will be the same at the beginning and at the end of the process. When the lesson series end there will be two focus groups interviews with 12 to 15 persons each of them with the participants that wants to share what they had learned through this process. All the participants must have 18 years old or more. Your participation in the study will consist in take the four lessons and answer the same questionnaire at the before and after the study series lessons. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of this investigation is collecting these ecostories of hope and share the experiences, strategies, and interventions. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you have questions you can communicate with Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira 787 478-0793. I will give follow up to this invitation. If you decide to participate, just let me know by a phone call or by letter to this direction: Calle 12 NO # 1341, Puerto Nuevo, San Juan, PR or send your letter by email sary.rosario@tcu.edu Thank you for your time. God bless you!

In Christ,

Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira
Doctor in Ministry Student
Brite Divinity School
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas, US

III. Third Group: Toa Alta Focus Group

Sample letter for the members of the Toa Alta Focus Group

Mm/dd/YYYY

Member's Name.

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Toa Alta Pueblo

Grace and peace from Jesus Christ. I am writing to invite you to be part of a research study related with how congregations support and help their communities when they face environmental problems. The principal investigator is Dr. Timothy Hessel-Robinson from the Texas Christian University and the co-investigator is Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira. The university is located in Fort Worth Texas, but the study will be conducted in Puerto Rico.

The study for the Toa Alta congregation will consist in the presentation of four lessons about the churches that have been supporting their communities when they had face environmental problems. The entire congregation will receive these lessons. The church's members that want to participate in the investigation will fill a consent document and before and after the four lessons they will answer a questionnaire that will be the same at the beginning and at the end of the process. When the lesson series end there will be two focus groups interviews with 12 to 15 persons each of them with the participants that wants to share what they had learned through this process. All the participants must have 18 years old or more. Participation is voluntary. We invite you to be part of the focus groups interviews of 12-15 people.

The purpose of this investigation is collecting these ecostories of hope and share the experiences, strategies, and interventions. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo will receive these stories as a process of collaborative learning between congregations. If you have questions you can communicate with Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira 787 478-0793. I will give follow up to this invitation. If you decide to participate, just let me know by a phone call or by letter to this direction: Calle 12 NO # 1341, Puerto Nuevo, San Juan, PR or send your letter by email sary.rosario@tcu.edu Thank you for your time. God bless you!

In Christ,

Rev. Sary N. Rosario Ferreira

Doctor in Ministry Student

Brite Divinity School

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas, US



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Stories of Hope:

Interventions of the Church in Eco-justice Challenges and the Path to Address the Toa Alta Landfill Environmental Crisis

IRB#

- Brite Divinity School at Fort Worth campus of Texas Christian University is conducting research to investigate a collaborative learning process about eco-justice in Christian Churches. This particular study is examining four churches that are active in eco-justice in their communities and will share their experiences with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Puerto Rico to look for interventions, strategies and experiences in facing environmental challenges.
- We are currently recruiting members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo that are 18 years or older.
- Church members will be asked to answer a questionnaire before and after a four lesson series, the first and the last Sunday and to participate in a focus group interview after the lesson series be completed.
- Participation will take place in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Toa Alta Pueblo, Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. There are no risks involved in this research.
- We provide snacks after the focus group interviews.

For more information, please scan the QR code:



Or go to: <https://sites.google.com/site/naomiekas/contact-us>

Texas Christian University

TCU does not discriminate based upon any protected status. Please see:

<http://www.tcu.edu/notice-of-nondiscrimination.asp>

APPENDIX B

BIBLE LESSON SERIES:
ECOJUSTICE CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH

- I. Introduction: In our communities, countries and planet, Nature suffers because of the environmental degradation. Contamination not only affects our physical health, but our emotional and spiritual health as well. When beautiful, natural spaces that God has created for His glory and our enjoyment are destroyed, there are difficult consequences for everyone, especially for vulnerable communities that suffer this injustice.

This lesson series: *Ecojustice Challenges for the Church* presents the reality experimented by communities in Puerto Rico that have fought for the eco-justice in their communities and how the Church has accompanied and fought side by side with them, facing the giants that want to contaminate and, in that way, oppress the health of the people and Nature.

The Biblical foundation for this lesson series is a well-known story from the Old Testament. The narration in 1 Samuel 17, tells of young David facing the giant, Goliath, and the Philistine army in an uneven battle in which the power of God and faith mark the difference towards victory for justice. The eco-stories that will be shared in these lessons are based on disparate struggles against the giants that symbolize the powerful industries and the Churches united with the communities fighting in faith and with hope in God against the injustices committed.

We invite you to prayer, reflection, and introspection through the study of these lessons to observe the environmental injustices in your community. Which are the ecojustice challenges we face? Who is the Goliath oppressing and threatening the health and integrity of my bioregion? What is the contribution of the Christian faith and of the Church facing the ecojustice challenges in our communities? Can we affirm as David did, “God will give us the victory.”? Join us in this series because there is no giant that cannot be defeated with faith and hope in the God of life.

- II. General Objective: Comprehend more in relation to the ecojustice from the Church in light of the experiences of other congregations that have accompanied their communities in the struggle with environmental problems.
- III. Specific Objectives:
- a. Explore accompaniment biblically and theologically for people and communities that suffer environmental problems.

- b. Name ways in which ecojustice is manifested in the stories of hope of our sister congregations.
 - c. Identify strategies and interventions mentioned in the eco-stories that may be pertinent and useful in the environmental problems we struggle with in the community our congregation is found in.
- IV. Lesson Distribution:
- a. Lesson 1: The Great Challenge in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo (1 Samuel 17:1-16)
 - b. Lesson 2: Accompanying in Justice Confronting the Great Challenges in Tallaboa, Peñuelas (1 Samuel 17: 17-30)
 - c. Lesson 3: Fighting for Justice before the Great Challenges in Espinosa, Dorado (1 Samuel 17:31-39)
 - d. Lesson 4: Defeating the Giant in Garrochales, Arecibo (1 Samuel 17:40-50)
- V. Educational Theories in the Lessons: The lessons will be prepared considering the constructivist theory of learning and adult education by Dr. Jane Vella. The structure of the lessons is similar to the one used the Sunday Bible lessons in the *Revista El Discípulo*.

We invite you to jointly discover how to face the giants in light of the Word of God.

First Lesson:

Title: *The Great Challenge in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo*

Memory Verse: And the Philistine said, “I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together.” (1 Samuel 17:10)

Bible Passage: 1 Samuel 17:1-16

Introduction: The narrative presented in 1 Samuel 17 in this lesson is the product of an editorial and theological process. Gerhard von Rad affirms that this text presents a series of messianic conceptions and their intention is to offer the hope of restoring monarchy in times of exile.²³⁵ In difficult times we need to hear stories of hope. The appearance of David is presented as the antithesis of Saul.²³⁶ The first book of Samuel presents the emergence of David starting with this great challenge to Israel from the giant Goliath. The great challenges in life come unexpectedly and as believers we must recognize their presence and face them with faith in God who give us the power to conquer any giant that comes to our lives and our community.

Through this class we will contemplate the great challenge the people of Israel faced before the Philistines and Goliath and how they reacted to it. Along with this well-known Bible story we will learn of the eco-story experienced by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato

²³⁵ Milton Schwantes y Marcos Paulo Bailão, “Profetas Anteriores (Josué, Jueces, 1 +2 Samuel y 1 + 2 de Reyes,” *RIBLA REVISTA DE INTERPRETACIÓN BÍBLICA LATINOAMERICANA* (Latin American Biblical Interpretation Journal), No. 60, Quito, Ecuador: RECU, (2008):5-12.62.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 61.

Nuevo, Guaynabo and how they, just like David and the Israelites faced a great giant during the years of 1990 and 1991. The challenge they faced was one of ecojustice in their community.

In light of the Scripture, we will examine how the eco-theology invites us to reflect on values of justice, hope, and leadership based on faith in God to defeat giants in life. We will begin with exercises to define concepts and discuss how we feel about environmental problems. We will study how this account presents humans before great challenges and how faith helps us face them. We will see the strategies used by the ICDC Hato Nuevo in facing the giant from their faith in God and service of Christian love for the community. We will end by reviewing the concepts and ideas that were most striking to the students.

Purpose: To learn that, when faced with great challenges in life, the believer may feel fear and anxiety, but they can be overcome with faith in God. To understand, through the story of the great challenge of Goliath to the people of Israel and the great challenge for the church in Hato Nuevo before an ecojustice situation, that the power and grace of God are sufficient to deal with any giant in the name of the Lord.

Biblical and Eco-theological Vocabulary:

1. Eco-theology: theology that emerges because of the environmental crisis, seeking answers from the Christian faith for the care of Creation. It comes from the word Ecology, which is the study of the interdependence of the living and nonliving things and their environment, and the word Theology which is the study of the nature of God and the Christian faith.
2. Ecojustice: When we establish ties between environmental problems and social justice the approach of the ecological justice, Ecojustice, deals with the destruction of the Earth by humanity and the abuse of political and economic power that cause the poor to suffer the effects of the degradation of the environment.
3. Philistines: The name given to the people who inhabited the southern coast of Palestine during most of the time covered by the Old Testament. They were constant enemies of the Israelites during the time of judges.
4. Leachates: These are liquids produced during garbage decomposition. They are dangerous because they carry toxic substances from toxic residues or elevated organic wastes that may contaminate superficial or subterranean water or the soil.
5. Incinerator: Incinerating implies carrying out the combustion of organic matter until it becomes ashes. This process is usually used in the treatment of residual solids from urban, industrial, or other sources. The incineration is done in ovens through the process of chemical oxidation. It generates toxic gases which must be treated as dioxins. It does not eliminate the residues completely, which obligates them to have a landfill in which to deposit the ashes., many of them toxic.

Lesson Outline:

- I. The challenge and description of the giant (v. 1-7)
- II. The great challenge to Israel (v. 8-10)
- III. Israel's reaction and description of David's family (v. 11-15)
- IV. Time of the threat to the people (v.16)

Educational Suggestions: Begin the lesson with a prayer and read the text completely. Read the purpose of the lesson. Find the definitions of the words eco-theology and ecojustice with the students. Working in pairs, the students could answer these two questions: What challenge have you defeated in your life that was as big as Goliath? How would you feel if you found out someone was going to put a regional industrial landfill and an ash-producing incinerator right next to your church? Give the students five minutes for this exercise. Go on to consider the analysis of the scripture and the application. In the analysis you can make a reference to the height of Goliath with a physical measurement the students are familiar with. The use of prepared visuals on Power Point will be helpful in narrating the eco-story during the analysis and application of the class. Closing exercise: Have a dialogue between three people; What was striking to you in the eco-story of Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo? How do you see the leadership of the church in the community? Which strategy stood out used by the church with the community to defeat the giant of the BFI in Hato Nuevo? What challenge or problem have you seen or heard about in our town? At the end, and voluntarily, invite the students to say a word, phrase, concept, or idea that stood out during the class. Close with a prayer.

Scripture Analysis and Ecclesial Reality:

The challenge and description of the giant (v. 1-7): The Biblical writer places us geographically and gives details of where the challenge to Israel and King Saul will occur. The Judean region was the setting; the valley of Elah between and on one mountain, the people of Israel are aligned. On the other side are the Philistines. An army facing an army, ready for battle. All expected a challenge. It was common for the times in which they lived, but they did not expect the great challenge from the Philistine army. Suddenly a different warrior appears. Martin Luther translates the description as giant.²³⁷ This man intimidated all of Israel's army. Kuruvilla states that his height is excessive, nine feet, nine inches.²³⁸ The Biblical author begins to describe the armor of this giant warrior. This same description comes from the armor used at the time the text was written.²³⁹ This description includes his weapons and speaks of a squire goes in front protecting with a shield. Kuruvilla affirms that this is the longest description of armor in the Old Testament.²⁴⁰ This means that this man, giant, very protected with his armor, weapons and squire had come from the Philistines and was standing in the middle of the two armies. In the battles of our life extremely armed giants come to meet us and with helpers to defend them. These giants are the threat we must face. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) In Hato Nuevo is in a valley between mountains in the rural area of the municipality of Guaynabo. It is here, specifically on the Elena Farm, (where the Guaynabo River, that provides water for part of the metropolitan area, begins) that a

²³⁷ Armando J. Levoratti, *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano Antiguo Testamento Volumen 1 Libros Proféticos y Sapienciales (Biblical Latinoamerican Commentary Old Testament: Prophetic and Wisdom Books)* (Navarra, España: Grupo Verbo Divino. 2007), 683.

²³⁸ Abraham Kuruvilla, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?" *JTES (Journal of Evangelical Theological Society)* 58/3 (2015): 487.

²³⁹ *Biblia de Jerusalén Latinoamericana (Jerusalem Latin American Bible)*, 338.

²⁴⁰ Abraham Kuruvilla, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?" 493.

multinational giant, Browning Ferris Industries (BFI), arrived in 1988.²⁴¹ This was the challenge for the community of Hato Nuevo; a multimillionaire, multinational company with a history of fines for contamination in other states. The BFI was the giant for Hato Nuevo as Goliath had been for Israel and David. Which are the giants we face in our time, in our community where God has placed us, and our church resides?

The great challenge to Israel (v. 8-10): Goliath launches his great challenge to Israel and its king, with an invitation to a duel in which the loser will have to serve the winner. Humanly, it is an unfair and unequal challenge. In this challenge the liberty of Israel and all the families present is at stake. According to Kuruvilla, the duel demonstrates the supremacy of one god over another and anticipates a major encounter between large armies. It is a battle between the god of the Philistines and the God of Israel. Kuruvilla states that if the Israelites lost, they would not only serve the Philistines but also their god, Dagon.²⁴² Duels during biblical times were very common. To face this challenge, great faith in the God of Israel was needed. They needed someone with sufficient faith to know that the battle is God's. Goliath presents the challenge and invites the Israelites to send a man who dares fight him. The great challenge has been presented. The challenge in Hato Nuevo had been hidden since 1988, when neighbors discovered the threat of constructing a regional industrial landfill and then an incinerator on the Elena Farm in Hato Nuevo. Ecojustice leader B said that on the Elena Farm there are nine brooks that join to form the Guaynabo River that in turn, by way of the "Los Filtros" Water Treatment Plant, provides drinkable water to Caguas, Guaynabo, Bayamon, and San Juan. BFI's plan was to build this industrial landfill right where the river begins, therefore contaminating this vital resource.

Israel's reaction and the description of David's family (v. 11-15): The initial reaction of Israel and King Saul was confusion and a lot of fear. When faced with great challenges in life, it is normal to feel fear, worry or anxiety but we must not let these emotions be bigger than our faith in God. When we, in the ICDC of Hato Nuevo were told that a multinational enterprise like the BFI wanted to build a regional, industrial landfill on the Elena Farm that was right next to our church, we initially felt fear and anguish, but we turned to God in prayer, seeking God and our faith in Him. God's perfect love casts out fear and united in purpose and prayer fear turned to action and we sought justice for our community in Hato Nuevo. The NASB Biblical Commentary states that Israel should not fear its enemies but should trust in the Lord.²⁴³ Our confidence in God will give us the strength to overcome fear and take our position before the great challenge we might face. In verses 12 to 15, David and his family's origin is presented to us. Some Biblical commentators see this as an interruption in the story. Bruggeman explains that the family of Jesse, David's father, is loyal to Saul's cause, having placed three of his sons in the military service, and because David was too young to go to war, he attended his father's sheep.²⁴⁴ We should remember that while

²⁴¹ Mike Williams, "Misión Industrial: Movement Building in Puerto Rico," 10.

²⁴² Abraham Kuruvilla, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?" 487.

²⁴³ Kenneth L. Barker ed, Zondervan NASB Study Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999), 380.

²⁴⁴ Walter Bruggeman. *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster: John Knox Press. 1990), 127.

David was attending his father's sheep, he had been called and anointed by the prophet Samuel in the previous chapter (16).

Time of the threat to the people (v. 16): The challenge and threat against Israel from Goliath, the Philistine, was continuous and remained so for forty days. This made Israel's army lose heart because days passed and no one, not even King Saul who should have acted and defended the interests of the people, would face the giant. When institutions, government agencies and leaders do not defend the interests of the people there is distress and hopelessness. Amid this reality, God raises someone to fulfill His purpose and make justice for the people. God raised David as His chosen to fight against the threat of oppression, which was what Goliath was for Israel, the people of God. God chose the ICDC in Hato Nuevo to confront the threat of contamination that would afflict the health, not only of the community, but also of the Guaynabo River, the entire community ecosystem and beyond. Goliath stood forty days defying, intimidating, degrading, and threatening God's people. At first, the BFI was trying to get the permissions secretly, without the community's knowing, but everything comes to light as it is written in Mark 4:22. Angel Sosa, the Leader of the Committee, tells us there were 16 months of intimidating and threatening to put a landfill and then an incinerator on the Elena Farm next to the ICDC in Hato Nuevo with families living there.²⁴⁵ The struggle of the church united with the community against the BFI regional industrial landfill project and later the incinerator that would generate ashes lasted 16 months and was incessant. Oftentimes, demands for justice mean overcoming obstacles such as confusion and fear. Israel was paralyzed when facing Goliath's intimidation and threats because they were confused and afraid. But when our trust is in God and not in human systems, we rise as David in the name of the Lord to face any giant that comes to our lives.

Application: The brothers and sisters that shared this eco-story with us compared themselves to the Biblical account, with them as David and the BFI as the giant. Ecojustice leader B said: "It was a fight like David and Goliath sustained by faith in God and community effort and solidarity." The church, united with the community, overcame fear, worry, and anguishJust as faith in God moved David to face the giant, our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ moved the church to action based on eco-theology for the ecojustice of the community. Confronted with the environmental crisis that threatened the ICDC in Hato Nuevo, the church found its understanding based on Christian faith.

Response based on Christian faith: Good Christian stewardship comes from understanding that all creation is the handiwork of God. The ecojustice leader HN cited Psalm 24:1. "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein." When we take care of nature, we obey God. We pray, but we also put our hands to work to awaken consciousness and responsibility for the good of our planet. The church, pondering on Biblical principles of love and justice responded to this situation based on its theological understanding. Ecojustice leader A agreed that they felt the responsibility to join the movement. Our pastor, Rev. Jesus I. Charriez, contacted the Leadership Committee of VEGOVE (Guaynabo Neighbors against the landfill in Hato Nuevo; initials in Spanish), offering the church facilities for meetings and activities. The church joined the fight since its beginning. This same ecojustice leader A said that the church

²⁴⁵ Williams, "Mission Industrial: Movement Building in Puerto Rico," 10.

surrender before the big interests. The responsibility as Christian leaders cannot be left to others. Group and individual prayer played key roles in our struggle. Psalm 40:1 says, “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me and heard my cry.” After 16 months of intense prayer and work, God heard our prayer, and we were victorious. It does not matter how long the giant is threatening, be it one day, forty, or 16 months; the important thing is not to give up and not lose hope. Ecojustice leader B reminded us that the church is an integrated part of the community and it is present whenever something might affect it. She affirms:

“The church has the responsibility to protect nature, as representatives of the love of God here on Earth; to care for flora, fauna, and the people. We are stewards of God’s creation. We must entirely obey God and be witnesses to the good use of the resources. When facing material and lucrative interests, the church must make use of prayer and action. The church is an instrument of peace here on Earth and must oppose anything that involves violence and oppression against the health of children, youth, and the elderly and the society in general. Peace does not imply staying silent but being responsible intercessors. It is an evangelizing method; the church is here to serve.”²⁴⁶

This imperative to Christian service and the faith and love of God made an impact on the church and the whole community. Leonardo Boff shares that the church may be persecuted and misinterpreted by powerful men of this world, but it cannot be permitted to be forgotten by the poor.²⁴⁷ The church should be present and more so for those that suffer from a lack of ecojustice in their communities. David was present for his family, his people, and his God. He fought for justice and God backed him up in a special way. Ecojustice leader B said that God was on our side and in our struggles our faith grows and solidifies. God is always on the side of justice where the church should also be. In her reflection, ecojustice leader B, shared that the church recognized the fact that our testimony of solidarity, service, and commitment, with the principles of dignity that protect life, are fundamental for others to see the love of Christ. The Word of God, prayer, and the testimony of the church were all key in this struggle. Ecojustice leader B affirmed that prayer was a tremendous resource and God gave strength to fight relentlessly until the end. As David, faith and the conviction in the power of God gave him the strength and precision to fight against the giant.

Response based on faith that leads to action: The church put their faith into action with the community. The Ecojustice leader B and others shared several strategies used within the church: Ecojustice leader HN said: “They held prayer meetings, prayer chains and sermons related to the care of the environment. We sought specialized people that could counsel and produce awareness as to our responsibility with the divine creation.” The same ecojustice leader HN shared:

We had environmental technicians, lawyers, press, ornithologist (studies birds), archeologist, and engineers. Some offered their services freely, while others were paid for their work. People of the same community that knew the Elena farm well, because they had worked there, shared their knowledge in the process. We could hear the brethren using acquired knowledge as they spoke.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Ecojustice Leader B.

²⁴⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Ecología: Grito de la Tierra, Grito de los Pobres*, 211.

²⁴⁸ Ecojustice Leader Hato Nuevo.

Ecojustice leader B said that the church selected Brother Augusto Rosado to be part of the Leadership Committee and liaison between the church and the community. He did an excellent job facing this struggle to help the church and the community. Ecojustice leader B also said that the Catholic Churches of Sonadora and Mamey I, the Adventist Church and the ICDC of Sonadora all joined, too. Ecojustice leader A shared that families joined the cause.

The ICDC of Puerto Rico was contacted, asking for prayer. Ecojustice leader B shared that:

The General Pastor, Rev. Elias Cotto, sent a letter to the president of the Board of Planning, in which he expressed the opposition of the entire denomination to the placing a regional industrial landfill and an incinerator that would destroy nature and was against our Christian principles of being stewards of creation. We participated in different peaceful protests in places such as the Governor's palace, the capitol building, the Department of Natural Resources, and other agencies.²⁴⁹

All generations: children, youth, adults, and the elderly joined. Even children presented speeches in public hearings. Ecojustice leader A remembered that some members of the church presented speeches opposing the landfill in various public hearings summoned by different agencies and other hearings on location. A Christmas card with a poem was sent to each agency with an aerial photograph of the Elena Farm. Each celebration of family days included local music, games for children and adults, horses to ride and more, and started with a prayer and pastoral exhortation. The people responded with reverence. VEGOVE prepared a bulletin called *Together* to keep the community informed.

Many other efforts were made such as fund-raising activities to cover expenses of the process; stickers were put up, symbols such as black flags were used to represent rejection of the project. There was a lot of prayer. They had retreats, vigils, and meetings were held in the ICDC in Hato Nuevo during the 16 months of the fight. Goliath intimidated the people of Israel for forty continuous days. The BFI tried to intimidate the people of God in Hato Nuevo, but it couldn't because the church and the community had their faith, confidence and hope in the Lord.

Response in hope: Facing the despair of not finding a man, not even the king, to confront Goliath and the great challenge he proposed, a new figure emerge, David. The text introduces David's family and this young pastor who will be the key piece in this story. When everything seems lost and no alternatives are contemplated, God surprises us with His power and grace. God makes provision for the battles of life. Though no one responds, God can send David to make the difference and affirm faith in God amid the difficulties that we may face in life. The church in Hato Nuevo had a similar experience. Ecojustice leader B told us that:

The fight seemed lost because it was against a multimillionaire, multinational company and we were a defenseless community against this monster. We won the battle! We played fair, with the love of God and the assurance that we defended the highest of principles for humans and the creation. The pertinent agencies did not give them the needed permissions. We saw the victory! This situation instilled in our community, and for generations to come, that there is no enemy that will stand before the presence of the Lord.²⁵⁰

Sometime later several initiatives to recycle began and the Guaynabo municipality has been the one with the best recycling programs on the island. God, powerful and present, used the rain on

²⁴⁹ Ecojustice Leader B.

²⁵⁰ Ecojustice Leader B.

the day of the hearing on location on the Elena Farm. That day there were people from the Planification Board, Department of Natural Resources, members of VEGOVE, scientists and also some with little schooling, but with knowledge concerning the Elena Farm, its fertile soil, its sinkholes, and the tributaries that fed the bodies of water. They did not sacrifice their principles. One of the leaders tells us that the rain was so intense that the “coqui” sang at nine in the morning (thinking it was night) and those present were able to recognize the ecological value and the important water collection of the zone they were in. God intervened in a special way producing hope in the middle of an ardent fight. God showed that what seemed impossible for humans was not impossible for Him.

Summary: God understands our situations and the great challenges we face; He also knows our emotions facing these great challenges, but He wants us to face them with faith put in Him and not on the giants. The example of Israel and Saul in this excerpt presents people who let fear paralyze them for forty days. God makes provision for His people and presents David and his family with a twist to throw open the story.

There are alternatives, possibilities to rethink our knowledge in light of the Word of God. Ivone Gebara shares that individuals should create meaning and reaffirm values that let us live with dignity.²⁵¹ The communities affected by environmental struggles deserve a decent ecosystem and not one affected by contamination from industries that develop near disadvantaged neighborhoods. We should put our trust in the Lord. He wants to develop in us the same trust and absolute faith that David had and that we need in today’s ecclesial leaders for our churches and communities. We should pray for churches in communities that suffer environmental problems so that God strengthens them, guides them, and gives them wisdom in the process of demanding ecojustice. We cannot turn a blind eye when faced with these challenges because God holds us accountable. With God’s help we can affirm concrete hope in the God of life, a hope for today’s struggles, for the challenges we face as a church together with our communities.

Prayer: Dear God and Creator of all that exists; Lord, our God, how excellent is your name in all the Earth. Thank you for being the almighty God when, standing before challenges of life, you are present in our struggles for ecojustice. Thank you for your handiwork in Hato Nuevo, our sister congregation and her community. Help us face the great challenges of life with our faith put firmly in you and the deepest conviction that we are more than victorious through Him who loved us and as one of the sisters from Hato Nuevo said “No enemy nor giant can stand in His presence.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Second Lesson:

Title: *Accompanying in Justice when facing the Great Challenges in Tallaboa, Peñuelas*

Memory Verse: “And David left his supplies in the hand of the supply keeper, ran to the army, and came and greeted his brothers.” 1 Samuel 17:22

Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 17: 17-30

Introduction: We need each other, and we are part of a great common house called Earth. With our vision put on the great challenge presented by Goliath, the giant, we refocus the story to

²⁵¹ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para Repensar el Conocimiento y la Religion*, 120.

observe from the perspective of a family that is in the Philistine-Israeli military conflict. David, the youngest of the family, is sent by his father to make sure his brothers are well. The story develops pointing out David's fresh and different perspective from those already in conflict. The way David handles the family dynamics because of his view of the problem will be studied in this lesson.

The community of Tallaboa Encarnación in Peñuelas has been suffering for more than sixty years because of environmental contamination. The most recent is the carbon ash deposit from the Applied Energy Systems Plant (AES) of Guayama in Peñuelas. The Camp against the ashes lasted from 2014 to 2017. The problem is not only of Peñuelas; it is of Puerto Rico. Estrada says that between 2004 and 2011, two billion tons of ash were deposited throughout Puerto Rico by the AES Plant. The ash deposits were used as landfill in urbanizations and roads in Guayama, San Juan, Dorado, Toa Alta, Caguas, Juncos, Ponce, Santa Isabel, Coamo, Arroyo, and Mayagüez.²⁵² This fight was described by the press and was very intense for the whole community. The church was key in bringing peace and being mediator in this situation of ecojustice.

This lesson takes a look at ecojustice and how the church can rethink and rediscover its role through the Scripture and values of love, respect, justice and peace. At the same time, we reflect on how, through love, we guide the church to fulfill its purpose here on Earth in the struggle for ecojustice.

Purpose: This lesson's objective is to understand how much we need each other on this common home, Earth. We need to understand each other as the great family we are and from love, manage the family, ecclesial and community dynamics with the goal of the common good for everyone and for nature.

Biblical and Eco-theological Vocabulary:

Camp: The Hebrew word for "camp" (ma.janéh) comes from the word ja.náh, which means "to camp; establish a camp". (Judge 15:9, Ex. 14:2, Gen 33:18). These terms are used regarding a nomad camp, the Levites' camp in the desert, the camps of the entire nation and to the camp of an army (2 Kings 25:1).

Carbon ash: these are produced in plants that generate electricity. The ashes produced in these carbon power companies are accumulated daily, get mixed with heavy metals and toxins and create one of the most difficult problems of our developed world.²⁵³

Baggage: Group of things we carry on a trip.

Lesson Outline:

- I. The instructions of Jesse, David's father, for his family (v. 17-19)
- II. David's arrival at the Camp (v. 20-22)
- III. David's reaction to the great challenge that his family and people face (v. 23-27)
- IV. Managing resistance and incomprehension in David's family (v. 28-30)

Educational Suggestions: Start the lesson with a prayer and read the entire text. Read the purpose of the lesson. Do an exercise called "The House of All". Divide the class into groups of six

²⁵² Elvin Estrada, "Cenizas de Carbón en Puerto Rico: Un Problema Ambiental y de Salud."

²⁵³ Elvin Estrada, "Cenizas de Carbón en Puerto Rico: Un Problema Ambiental y de Salud."

students. Together they will make a house. The parts of the house are the students. The purpose of the activity is to understand how we are part of God's creation and our common home is the Earth. After the exercise ask: What part of the house were you? How did you feel being part of the house? Did others depend on you to keep the house standing?

Then proceed with the analysis of the Scripture and the lesson application, integrating David's family dynamics with the challenge confronted by the Iglesia Evangelica Unida (United Evangelical Church) of Puerto Rico and the community of Peñuelas with the ash deposit and other environmental problems. Use the images in the Power Point presentation to illustrate the reality of the Camp against the ashes in Peñuelas. Leave time for students in pairs to answer these questions. How did the United Evangelical Church of Tallaboa, Peñuelas manage the resistance during the environmental challenge they went through? What strategies used by the church, caught your attention when they faced the ecojustice challenge? Close with a prayer for the brothers and sisters of the United Evangelical Church in Tallaboa, Penuelas and for their community and for all communities that suffer environmental problems.

Scripture Analysis and Ecclesial Reality:

Instructions of Jesse, David's father, for his family (v. 17-19): David's father gives instructions to his youngest son, David, to take provisions to the camp. David receives the instructions with urgency knowing the provisions are sustenance for his brothers who are at the war. Walter Bruggeman presents this as an example of the militia of the people which depends on the participation of everyone giving support specially of the youth.²⁵⁴ David does not limit himself to only give the provisions but also to make sure his brothers are well and to bring a sign which confirms their wellbeing. This concern for his family is very valid, more so in times of war and great trials such as the one the people of God were passing currently.

The United Evangelical Church (IEU) of Tallaboa Encarnacion in Peñuelas is concerned about its community and the wellbeing of its brothers and sisters. This beloved congregation has been in the community for 115 years. Tallaboa of Peñuelas has been a community highly affected by environmental contamination since last century when CORCO started and later many industries have left marks on the ecosystem and on the people's health. In 2014, a camp was started against the ash deposits of the AES coal company of Guayama in the Peñuelas Valley Landfill (PVL) that belongs to AC Waste. In this reality that affects the community, the IEU of Tallaboa has been key. Spiritually speaking, the spiritual sustenance has been provided for the camp against the carbon ash deposit, by the spiritual leaders of the IEU in Tallaboa Peñuelas. Pastoral accompaniment of the church for the community has been comprehensive. The IEU has shared the bread of life with those that fight for ecojustice.

David's arrival at the camp (v. 20-22): In his leadership, David was diligent even with the work he had as a shepherd. Before going to the camp, David prepared himself, got up early, and delegated the responsibility of his flock of sheep to a guard while he prepared to fulfill his father's command. Davis arrives at the camp in a key moment, hearing the battle cry. Bruggeman says that David has a vitality from the beginning that Saul does not have in the text.²⁵⁵ David left the

²⁵⁴ Walter Bruggeman. *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 128.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

provisions with another person and ran to where the soldiers were to seek his brothers and see if they were well. David is neither intimidated nor afraid of getting close to the battle. He wants to fulfill the mission his father gave him. How concerned are we about our family's wellbeing? Our neighbor's wellbeing? Our community and country's wellbeing? The ethics of the care of creation seeks the common good for all beings. Boff states that religious people that opt for their liberation and that of their brothers and sisters should be armed with the living experience of a great hope, hope that goes beyond visible limits of their own history.²⁵⁶ The brothers and sisters of IEU in Tallaboa Penuelas has had that hope to seek and secure the wellbeing of their families and community. Being present in the camps against the carbon ash deposit as a church has brought peace and tranquility in the midst of the battle.

David's reaction to the great challenge his family and people face (v.23-27): David sees the giant Goliath with his own eyes and hears his threats. The situation is clear. This is what is disturbing God's people and his family. David sees clearly which is what separates him from Saul and the rest of the Israelites.²⁵⁷ Though fear takes hold of the Israelite army, David arrives with a new perspective. When threats last a long time, fear, discouragement, and weariness come as they did to the Israelite camp. Amid these realities, when hope appears to vanish, leaders with new perspectives, focused on God and His power, arise to deal with the problem that afflicts us. David had already defeated Goliath in his mind. David did not see him as a giant but as one who was disrespecting God and His people. David asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26)²⁵⁸ David not only gave his opinion of the Philistine, but also gave value to the demoralized Israelites calling them "armies of the living God". David comes with a perspective different from Saul's and that of the Israelite army. The detriment of health has been one of the significant injustices in the community of Tallaboa, Peñuelas. The problem is clear; the years of environmental contamination and the continuous exposure to toxins in the air and water have brought about an increase in cancer, and respiratory and skin diseases. Through prayer, education and its presence, the leadership of the local church and pastor, and the General Pastor, received support to walk with the community before these great challenges. Our leadership as Christians should inspire trust in God amid difficult circumstances such as the fight for ecojustice.

Managing resistance and incomprehension in David's family (v. 28-30): David went to his brothers on the battlefield because he had the mission of taking provisions to them and making sure they were well. Their reaction was not the one David expected especially from the oldest brother. Eliab's reaction was one of jealousy, at the idea that his younger brother would do what he, with his legitimacy, could not do against Goliath and win freedom for all his family.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 184.

²⁵⁷ Kenneth, Barker L. ed, Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 381.

²⁵⁸ Bible New International Version.

²⁵⁹ Hillel I. Millgram. *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel*, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tcu/detail.action?docID=1162113>. Created from tcu on 2019-08-28 11:07:00, UPA 2009), 181.

Apparently, the older brother judged David's intentions. Many times, our own families have different visions of how to face problems. The resistance David had come from his own family. Differences will always exist; how these differences are dealt with is key in going on. In a church, finding brothers and sisters who think differently is part of human dynamics. Clarifying, listening, orienting, and accompanying are keys to deal in moments when the visions of one issue are different. The IEU of Tallaboa, Penueles also found a certain amount of resistance. They listened, oriented, and continued educating the church; some understood, some left but some returned after visits and demonstrations of love.

This is the story of a conflict between three giants (Goliath, Saul, and Eliab) and the apparent inexperience of young David. Kuruvilla says that this is a story of conflict between three giants and David; a battle with three who have stature, resources and experience against one, deprived of all these things which seem to be essential.²⁶⁰ The community of Tallaboa, Penueles was not facing one giant, but more than three, with all the contaminating industries and the landfills of dangerous substances that exist in their area. It is impressive how they have been able to resist and fight against so many giants in the name of the Lord. David managed Eliab, his older brother's complaint. David knows his brother's statements are not true. David again asks other people, after the conversation with his brother, and makes sure of the situation, confirming information; he is not in a hurry and the people confirm the information he has been given.

Application: Let us see the various giants that, like David, the IEU in Tallaboa, Penueles, had to face. *A constant threat to the health of the people and the ecosystem:* The Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (CORCO) was established in 1953 in this coastal community. When the complex was constructed, families were displaced. The Ecojustice leader K that lived there experienced how they were displaced and relocated in Guaipaco, later called Sanatorio (Sanatorium). At night, the burners of the plant were turned on and they had to vacate their houses because of the intense heat. CORCO grew economically for a time but later dwindled until only ruins remained. CORCO left dangerous substances there in tanks that are rusty and residue containing asbestos. In 2013, during the demolition of one of the old buildings, asbestos fibers were released into the community, contaminating the school with substances that can produce cancer and asbestosis, a severe respiratory disease.²⁶¹ The church leaders tell us the ceiling of the temple was filled with the substance.

The Industrial Chemical Corporation was founded in 1974, managing sulfuric acid among other dangerous substances. This company was criticized in 2018 for run-off of dangerous chemicals into the bay and for releasing clouds of toxic particles into the air endangering neighbors and students of the Jorge Lucas Perez Valdieso School. Fishermen and the ecosystem have also been affected.²⁶² When the ecosystem is affected, we are all affected because we are part of this common home, the Earth.

²⁶⁰ Abraham Kuruvilla, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What he is Saying?" 498.

²⁶¹ "EPA Anuncia Acuerdo con Dos Empresas para Limpieza de Asbestos en Peñuelas."

²⁶² Jason Rodríguez, "Empleados Denuncian Contaminación con Químicos en Tallaboa."

The Ecosystem Landfills, for non-dangerous domestic and industrial wastes, and the Peñuelas Valley Landfill, for dangerous industrial waste have been the center of controversy because both receive carbon ash from the AES of Guayama. There is another landfill called Proteco but it closed in 2009. It received dangerous wastes and is classified as a “superfund site” #19 of the EPA and to clean it you need 50 to 100 million.²⁶³ This landfill has 900 drums of toxic metals, residues, and solvents among others.²⁶⁴ All of these dangerous substances affect the ecosystem and the people. In a study done by the EPA in 2012 in relation to the carbon ash of the AES plant, they found arsenic, boron, chlorine, and chromium in levels 100 times higher than permitted.²⁶⁵ The problem with these substances is that they cause cancer. Arsenic and chromium are classified by the International Agency for Research Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organization as the principal heavy metals in the development of cancer and other chronic diseases.²⁶⁶ The detriment of health has been one of the significant injustices in the community of Tallaboa, Peñuelas. Ecojustice leader K shared that two of his brothers died of cancer and that he is a cancer survivor and that many of the community have been diagnosed or have died of this difficult disease. In the same way, various church families suffer from cancer. Confronted with suffering and injustice the church did not remain quiet. The church acted according to the duties of the Kingdom of God.

The role of the Church in the challenges of ecojustice: Ecojustice leader L shared that the Church’s location makes it receive direct impact of all the sources of contamination. Ecojustice leader J said that when the ashes are transported, part escapes and contaminates our school, the church, homes, and bodies of water. Ecojustice leader L said that the church has been conciliator and mediator of peace, has supported the citizens and environmental groups in pacific protests and has guided the community. The church is seen as a neighbor. Ecojustice leader L affirmed that: “We have visited sick people that present respiratory complications and cancer.” Ecojustice leader J remembered that the church has held services in the camp, sermons, ecumenical acts, distributed written information, organized pro-health marches, and health clinics with the support of the General Pastors of the IEU in PR. The pastoral leadership both locally and generally, has been key in this process. One of the church leaders went to the US Congress to explain the situation of the ash contamination. This same leader took the petition to cease contamination to the Wailing Wall on a trip to Jerusalem. Ecojustice leader K said that when the community, protesting or in demonstrations, observed the presence of the church, they felt supported and, in some way, stronger.

The Camp against the carbon ash began in 2014. EC Waste is the operator of Peñuelas Valley Landfill (PVL), the one that reinitiated the collection of ash from the AES Plant in Guayama, because of a favorable decision of the Appeals Court, which has provoked civil disobedience and 61 arrests.²⁶⁷ Ecojustice leader K has been arrested twice. After 2017, the ash deposit stopped, and

²⁶³ “Limpiarán Antiguo Vertedero de Proteco en Peñuelas.”

²⁶⁴ John M. Hunter y Sonia I. Arbona. “*Paradise Lost: An Introduction to the Geography of Water Pollution in Puerto Rico*,” 1352.

²⁶⁵ AC. Garrabrants, DS Kosson, R. DeLapp, Peter Kariher, *Leaching Behaviour of “Agremax” Collected from a Coal-Fired Power Plant in Puerto Rico*. 2012, ii.

²⁶⁶ Elvin Estrada, “Cenizas de Carbon en Puerto Rico un Problema Ambiental y de Salud.”

²⁶⁷ Michele Estrada Torres, “Cenizas a los Dos Vertederos.”

the Supreme Court enforced a municipal ordinance that establishes that depositing ash in Peñuelas is prohibited. They have seen victory in the name of the Lord and defeated this giant.

To obtain this victory, family and ecclesial dynamics were worked on with love and God's wisdom. In the IEU of Tallaboa, there are both active leaders of the movement against the ash and officers of the Police of Puerto Rico. In one family there is a leader of the movement whose daughter is a police officer. Ecojustice leader K said that this reality brought resistance at first when there were arrests due to the civil disobedience against the ash deposit. Ecojustice leader L shared that some parishioners thought these were secular, mundane movements; others showed indifference. Through orientation and visitation this resistance was managed and some parishioners who had left, came back. This same Ecojustice leader L said that the Church Board managed the situation with wisdom and parishioners that had left the church, with visits and education, returned. Ecojustice leader J affirmed that this situation was handled explaining and teaching that this fight was for quality of life. The church, with love and wisdom in its leadership, managed the church dynamic and stayed faithful to God and to its role as the prophetic voice amid challenges for ecojustice. Ecojustice leader J affirmed that the church cannot stay quiet when there is an environmental problem in its surroundings. The Declaration of Faith and Order of the United Evangelical Church (IEU) of Puerto Rico affirms that it is the responsibility of humans to make ecological justice when they reestablish, maintain and defend the equilibrium of creation through clear and coordinated actions.²⁶⁸ From the understanding of the Word of God and the Declaration of Faith and Order of the IEU, the church in Tallaboa has acted in faith and trust in God.

Continuous learning in hope: Ecojustice leader M summarized the experience affirming that, "We put faith in God in the first place, love for the people, love for the Earth." With priorities in the right order, victory was obtained because ashes are no longer deposited in Penuelas. Ecojustice leader K said that we have to integrate ourselves in the problems of the community. This same leader tells us that constant communication with the pastors and interested members and the constant presence of members of other communities helped maintain hope. Ecojustice leader J: "The church in prayer, encouraging and supporting me and my family, and above all else with a lot of faith helped me preserve hope." Ecojustice leader L affirmed that with faith, perseverance, and mainly with the grace of God many battles are won. We must stay aligned with the purpose of the church in the community because we must continue educating. Perseverance, strength, and the faith of parishioners whose health was being affected helped us keep up the hope. David stayed focused on what was before him to win. The IEU of Tallaboa, Peñuelas stayed focused on God and on the task of accompanying its community in the environmental problems it faced.

Summary: In our lives not only one Goliath appears but sometimes several and occasionally at the same time. David not only faced the giant, Goliath but also the lack of understanding of his family and the unbelief of King Saul. It seems everything was against David, but nothing diminished his faith. On the contrary, David stayed focused, his hope fixed on God. With that faith he faced each of those giants and defeated all obstacles to free his people from oppression.

The IEU of Tallaboa, Peñuelas has faced various giants with faith, prayer, courage, and perseverance. As David, they have faced struggles and lack of understanding, but their faith has shone like a beacon in the middle of the darkness. The church has illuminated the way to justice

²⁶⁸ Iglesia Evangélica Unida de Puerto Rico, Declaración de Fe y Orden, H.

and peace on their walk of love and accompaniment to the families and the community. Water and air contamination in Tallaboa are the contamination of Puerto Rico and the Earth.

Prayer: God of peace and all justice, thank you for the opportunities in which we see You work amid the people that suffer health issues because of environmental contamination. Help us as a church to be in solidarity and compassionate, to understand our families, our brothers and sisters of the church and the community when we face situations of ecojustice in which our healthy lives and the new generations are at stake. Amen.

Third Lesson:

Title: *Fighting for Justice before the Great Challenges in Espinosa, Dorado*

Memory Verse: “Moreover David said, “The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.” 1 Samuel 17:37

Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 17:31-39

Introduction: Just as David faced the giant Goliath with faith in God and determination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Espinosa, Dorado has confronted not one but several giants in its fight for ecojustice in its community. In this lesson together we will learn how faith and past experiences prepare you to face new challenges we confront in our lives. We will also observe how David managed his encounter with Saul in a way that did not allow him to become discouraged when faced with Saul’s pessimistic ideas.

The struggle for ecojustice in Espinosa started decades ago. In the initial dialogue with the leaders of the church that shared part of this important story, the David versus Goliath image was used and compared to this struggle for ecojustice with this incredible battle.²⁶⁹ Pastoral care, accompaniment, care ethics and rethinking understandings were key in managing these situations. We will also see how resistances flourish in the struggle for ecojustice and how these can be managed wisely.

The lesson includes time for the students to interact and share experiences. In the same way it is an invitation to reflect on the experience of David and his encounter with Saul. The Bible story will help us see the experience of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Espinosa, Dorado in its struggle for ecojustice. We will specially focus on sharing this story that demonstrates special determination and mature growth facing challenges for years in the community, as in the Bible story. Fighting for justice is not an option for the Church, but a moral imperative that we cannot ignore and a Biblical command that we must attend to and follow.

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson is to understand the importance of faith and determination even when facing negative predictions in the mission we have before us. The story of David and his encounter with King Saul before facing Goliath, will provide keys to realize the understandings on which David based his conviction to face the giant. The story of the ICDC in Espinosa, Dorado gives a wonderful example to further understand the determination that produces a firm faith in God amid the challenges of ecojustice.

Biblical and Eco-theological Vocabulary:

²⁶⁹ Meeting to fill out Consent Form in Espinosa, Dorado. May 13, 2019.

Uncircumcised Philistine: Philistine that has not been submitted to the Jewish rite of circumcision. A pagan.

Coat of armor: Part of the armor, considered a defense weapon, also called coat of mail.

Fugitive dust: Uncontrolled fine particles that are registered as loss in the process of transport, collection, and manipulation of minerals and carbon

Cement factory: company that produces cement using limestone

Lesson Outline:

- I. Encounter between David and King Saul (v. 31-33)
- II. David shares his life experience with King Saul (v. 34-37)
- III. King Saul's consent and trying on the armor (v. 38-39)

Educational Suggestions: Start the lesson with a prayer and read the entire text. Read the purpose of the lesson. Reflection exercise and five-minute dialogue: Take a few moments to think of your favorite childhood places in Nature. What does the place look like now? Has it changed? How? Share your impressions with the person next to you. Challenges in life produce change. After the exercise we will work the lesson vocabulary. Make a poster with the different definitions and hand them out before the class. Assigned students should stand and read the definitions.

Proceed to the analysis of the Scripture and the application. Use the images of the Power Point Presentation to illustrate the fight for ecojustice in Espinosa, Dorado. Four-person group exercise: Each group will have a card on which they will write the strategies used in this situation that most called their attention as a church. With your group, share impressions about the way the church dealt with the environmental situation that afflicted their community. Each group gives their card to the facilitator. These concepts are written on a "paper gram". Finish the class using the prayer at the end of the lesson.

Scripture Analysis:

Encounter between David and King Saul (v. 31-33) The expected encounter occurs between David and King Saul; an encounter that lets us see large contrasts. David, full of faith and enthusiasm, urges that no one dismay because of the Philistine. It is interesting to point out that David never calls Goliath, the giant, but only refers to him as "this Philistine". David did not attribute power to the enemy. On the contrary, as someone who was defying God. David decided to put his faith into action. "Your servant will go and fight this Philistine." The ICDC in Espinosa, Dorado decided to put their faith into action when their community started to suffer the onslaught of contamination in their health because of the cement company that was in their community since the 1960's. Prolonged exposure to the fugitive particles generated by the San Juan Cement produced respiratory diseases such as asthma, frequent colds, dry cough, skin conditions and cancer to the people of the church and neighbors of the community. In addition to this, the environment started to change due to the acid rain caused by the contaminants present in the surroundings. The parishioners of the church and the community, just as David, decided to face this giant with the great challenge and oppression they had started to live.

When King Saul heard David's determination, he immediately told David he could not face this challenge and began to explain the limitations he saw in David. Kiruville says Saul considers David

inadequate for the battle with the giant without adequate resources.²⁷⁰ Here we clearly see how Saul's understanding and perspective contrast with David's understanding. Kiruville, referring to soldiers and Saul, expresses that they were wrong to think that David did not have the height, resources nor experience, and they were wrong to think that victory came from these elements.²⁷¹ For David, Saul's words were very far from his reasoning as a young shepherd. Kiruville continues saying that in David's math, his height, resources, and experience were founded on God.²⁷² David would not do anything by his own strength, but he was protected by his faith in God and His power. Clearly, for David, God is omnipotent. David's rejection from Saul reminds us of 1 Samuel 16 where David's own father forgot about him when the prophet, Samuel, went to anoint him to be the next king. How many times has God helped us discover new meanings and new perspectives in our trials! God calls us to rethink our knowledge as he did with the prophet, Samuel, with Saul, and his people so we do not see as men see but with God's perspective. The Brazilian theologian, Ivone Gebara, reminds us that our knowledge of God will have repercussions on our behavior in our daily lives.²⁷³ The reflection of our knowledge should be integral so we can capture the aspects that guide our behavior in the actions that harm Nature and ourselves. Therefore, there is a contrast between David and Saul's attitude. Saul's concept of God contrasts with David, whose faith is in God and that He can defeat the god of the Philistines and Goliath. How do we see God? How does the church understand that God can bring justice and love that sustains and renews all creation? The ICDC of Espinosa, Dorado turned to the Bible, prayer and to its theological understanding to rethink the situation of ecojustice they were living in light of the Scriptures. They tell us that in this process, the pastors were of great help. Their leadership guided them in the process towards the development of eco-theology in the parishioners.

David shares his life experience with King Saul (v. 34-37): David does not speak in a void; he has life references. God had saved him previously from savage beasts that threatened the sheep that were under faith we develop in past events gives the believer courage to trust in the power of God to face the present crisis.²⁷⁴ How many dangers and threats has the Lord saved you from? David presents Saul with his resumé. God has saved David from the bear and the lion so his conviction was that God would also save him from this Philistine. What a great blessing it is to be able to remember and recognize the times in which God has saved us! These are the experiences that feed our faith for present and future trials.

David's courage comes from his relationship with God. The NASB Study Bible says that David's faith contrasts with Saul's loss of faith; a true theocratic king should have total confidence in the Lord.²⁷⁵ This total confidence in God enables us to face the giants. This brave church and

²⁷⁰ Abraham, Kiruville, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What he is saying?" 496.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 500.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ivone Gebara, *Intuiciones Ecofeministas: Ensayo para Repensar el Conocimiento y la Religion*, 139.

²⁷⁴ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Comentario Biblico Moody Antiguo, (Moody Biblical Commentary of the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Editorial Portavoz, 1962), 288-289.

²⁷⁵ Kenneth L. Barker ed, Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 382.

community not only fought against the San Juan Cement, but against seven projects, some independent, others jointly with the cement company, that threatened the health of the community already affected by the contamination. The ethical concern for the good of our common house, the Earth, affirms the responsibility we must assume on behalf of our brothers, sisters, and everything. Boff tells us we should promote solidarity between all living things, starting with the least favored; a passionate appraisal of life in all its forms; the participation as a response to what appeals to us as humans; and the respect for nature which we are responsible for.²⁷⁶ This ethical concern is what moved the parishioners of the ICDC of Espinosa to seek the common good for the brothers and sisters of its bioregion.

King Saul's consent and trying on the armor (v. 38-39): King Saul gives his consent; he entrusts him to God and gives David his royal armor. David is wise, he will not deal with Goliath on the Philistine's terms. As an armed warrior, he does not rise to the level of this monster, not in mass, nor battle skills. He prefers to fight against him on his own terms, light, agile, and with a familiar weapon.²⁷⁷ David takes off Saul's armor; he is not accustomed to it. Kiruvilla says that though it may seem comical, this act represents rejection of the ideology of weapons; he will not trust them. David prefers to play his role as shepherd with the pastoral tools he has always used and with which God has used previously to protect his flock.²⁷⁸ To face Goliath, David will use this confidence and what God has equipped him with. The ICDC In Espinosa, Dorado turned to the spiritual weapons; prayer, vigils, the Word of God; In every moment these have supported, guided, and given the victory before all challenges the church has faced. When faced with environmental challenges, as David, they had their trust in God and in what God had equipped them with to defeat.

Application

The struggle for Ecojustice in the community of Espinosa from the church: The fight first started with the San Juan Cement. Camacho said that in the decade of the 70's, the fugitive dust from the particles of cement settled on the temple and on all the community; the houses cracked because of the dynamite detonations in the limestone hills.²⁷⁹ Later, the struggle diversified with the arrival of Safety Kleen. In 1983, by initiative of the EPA, there were experiments done using synthetic fuel made of the wastes of used oils from other industries, to burn in the ovens of San Juan Cement. This generated concern because the new federal regulations considered synthetic fuel as dangerous waste and that started the fight against Safety Kleen Ecosystem Co.²⁸⁰ This led the municipality of Dorado to ask Dr. Neftali Garcia to do a scientific study of the community. Lenart says this

²⁷⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 532.

²⁷⁷ Milligram Hillel, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel*, 182.

²⁷⁸ Abraham Kiruvilla, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What he is saying?" 500.

²⁷⁹ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 139.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 140.

study, which included 42 homes in favor of the wind and 20 homes against the wind, found that there was a difference in the proportion of illnesses and negative effects in the health of those that lived in favor of the wind of San Juan Cement.²⁸¹ In 1990, someone tried to establish an asphalt company. The neighbors found out about the process of public hearings, were able to attend and oppose. In that occasion the JCA (Board of Environmental Quality) decided in favor of the neighbors.²⁸² They confronted problems with the Andres Reyes Burgos company, who by leasing, occupied an area in Espinosa to throw garbage without permission. Later, they wanted to locate a place to keep their garbage trucks. As a result of public hearings, the JCA decided in favor of the community.²⁸³ This victory included the support of the church and of the municipalities of Dorado and Vega Alta. In 1993, someone tried to develop a project aimed at storing products derived from petroleum (kerosene and diesel) for the Gas Control Products Company.²⁸⁴ The community opposed the project. In the year 2000, they tried to utilize used oil to burn in the ovens of the San Juan Cement. The substances found in used oil are related to at least one of the eight types of cancer.²⁸⁵ These struggles were continuous and intense. Cobian explains that in 2001, there was an escape of crude limestone dust that affected the more than 400 families that live in that community. It seemed as if it were snowing. This occurred at 10:30 pm and no one went to warn the community.²⁸⁶ The thoughtlessness towards the community was such that they did not even alert them to the danger so they could take preventive measures in their homes.

Ecojustice leader H told us that resistance arose by people that worked in the cement factory, and it was managed wisely, through constant communication with the congregation, providing truthful information from professionals and environmental support organizations such as: Environmental Justice, Industrial Mission, Scientific and Technical Service, among others. Ecojustice leader H said that Classes of the Study Commentary “The Disciple” were given related to stewardship of the environment. These lessons helped to rethink knowledge and meanings. Ecojustice leader G told us that at first, some members did not see these actions well because they could not conceive environmental struggles as part of a spiritual life. Through Christian education and the testimony of those involved in these struggles, there is more openness to the topic as in this our lives are spent. What meanings did the ICDC in Espinosa have to rethink to serve the church and the community?

Strategies used by the ICDC in Espinosa in their struggle for ecojustice: Part of the strategies used were ecumenical vigils. Camacho says us that the church held its first vigil on April 22, 1994 in front of the plaza of Guarisco, Espinosa to thank God for the creation of the planet and to denounce

²⁸¹ Melanie Lenart. “S. J. Cement May Renew Burning Practice.”

²⁸² Sara del Valle, “Lugar Dulce” para las Industrias.”

²⁸³ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discipulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el Corazón de su Comunidad*, 142.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 143.

²⁸⁵ Informative Flyer from the Committee for a Better Environment. 2000.

²⁸⁶ Mariana Cobian, “Contaminación Ambiental en Dorado: Vecinos del Barrio Espinosa Exigen Acción a la JCA.”, 41.

the health problems suffered by the community of Espinosa.²⁸⁷ This vigil also had the support of the ICDC in Puerto Rico because the General Pastor, Rev. Luis F. Del Pilar, announced it. The letter was directed to all the ICDC in Puerto Rico and the Pastoral Body inviting them to the vigil. The support on a denominational level in Puerto Rico is an example of collaboration of the individual churches and the Central Level on issues of vital importance as is the protection of the environment. In the document of the Prayer Vigil Pro Environmental Health, part of the affirmation of purposes of the vigil, affirms the recognition of spiritual resources as instruments to obtain justice.²⁸⁸ It emphasizes a spirituality focused on obtaining justice. This is a spirituality of a practical life. Camacho tells us that on September 30, 1994, the church held a vigil in front of the Capitol Building in San Juan.²⁸⁹ The range of these efforts of unity and prayer continued to strengthen the environmental struggle.

In the organizational structure of the ICDC in Espinosa, community service is present. Ecojustice leader H shared that the Ministry of Church and Community is a voice in the community environmental organization called Committee Pro-Defense of the Environment of Espinosa, receiving acceptance from the residents. Ecojustice leader F told us that the Church was also present denouncing the environmental violations with evidence to the pertinent agencies. Ecojustice leader H shared that in this accompaniment with the community, the church opened up its facilities of the temple to the environmental organizations for meetings or public hearings. In the same way, members of the church presented reports in public hearings to the regulating agencies Board of Environmental Quality, EPA, Department of Natural Resources) on behalf of the ICDC in Espinosa, said Ecojustice leader H. Ecojustice leader I said that meetings of the Committee Pro-Defense of the Environment of Espinosa were held weekly. All of the struggles for ecojustice were attended to at these meetings. On February 3, 1996, the Committee handed out flyers with an invitation to a seminar at the ICDC in Espinosa, about how to prepare for a public hearing.²⁹⁰ This inclusive and educational strategy opened the doors of the Church to empower people who had not dared participate in a public hearing.

The church planted 500 trees, sponsored by the Department of Natural Resources (DRNA) and gave certificates that read, "I promise to plant, care and conserve this tree in my church as a contribution to the environment."²⁹¹ Camacho also shares that the church created the Ministry of Environmental Health and a recycling program as part of its work plan. The topic of environmental protection has been present in the Department of Christian Education and in summer camps of children, youth, and the elderly.²⁹² The Church not only served as facilitator in the struggle for ecojustice in the community, but the gospel message was also included in the environmental topic.

²⁸⁷ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 141.

²⁸⁸ *Documento del Orden de la Vigilia del Viernes 22 de abril de 1994*.

²⁸⁹ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 141.

²⁹⁰ Committee Pro-Defense of the Environment in Espinosa, Dorado.

²⁹¹ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad*, 143.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 143-144.

Victories and Continuous Hope: David had the capacity to become angry when hearing the words of Goliath. Ecojustice leader F said that we must have the capacity to become angry. Another Ecojustice leader H shared that the certainty of the purpose of justice, of defending and helping to protect God's Creation of which we are a part is an aspect of her Christian faith. The reaction of the community seeing the involvement of the Church also brought a sense of continuous hope. In 1997, the Metropolitan University gave them the Chelonia prize for their struggle for environmental justice.²⁹³ Ecojustice leader H says that when we accompany the communities in their environmental problems, we recognize that it is a different way to evangelize and bring environmental justice. Ecojustice leader I expressed that he was given hope through the untiring work, the gratefulness of the community, and knowing we could not fail. We had God working on the project and knew He would not fail. Our faith and the Lord's justice were enough. David also knew that God would not fail.

The leaders of ecojustice shared a beautiful testimony. Camacho says the church ministered to and accompanied Sarah Peisch (environmental leader) in her final battle against cancer. She experienced peace and a special joy through prayer and Christian support.²⁹⁴ What a beautiful story it is when we can share the love of God even amid life's greatest adversities! God's presence makes the difference, and an integral spirituality can accompany even in the deepest pain. Sarah is a memory of that interaction of support and love between the Church and the community.

Summary: The pastoral care that David showed in his leadership demonstrates an alternative of accompaniment amid the great challenges in the struggle for ecojustice. Alonso Schöckel talks about the contrast between the warrior and the shepherd.

The pastor's motive has two parts; on one hand, the insistence of his smallness, his youth: on the other hand, the divine support. This motive has symbolic value. The shepherd cares for his sheep, defends them from the beasts; the king/pastor, people/flock, enemies/beasts. Saul is not capable of fulfilling his role. David fulfills it demonstrating his ability to reign. The pastor assumes the care of his people and defends them from the enemy.²⁹⁵

The church and its leadership today have the challenge to assume the care of the people facing environmental problems and showing their capacity of leadership in issues that affect us all. Ecojustice leader H said that the community of faith is a powerful tool of support, credibility, love, and service to disadvantaged, poor, oppressed by the economically powerful, communities, being a facilitator with its spiritual and physical resources and its presence and its emotional accompaniment. Ecojustice leader H said that we learned that the church is here to serve. Watching over our neighbor is a command of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must leave the four walls and help

²⁹³ Picture Plaque of the Chelonia Prize Social 1997.

²⁹⁴ *Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Espinosa, Dorado, 90 años En el corazón de su comunidad,* 142.

²⁹⁵ Alonso Schöckel, *Biblia del Peregrino Antiguo Testamento Prosa Edición de Estudio Tomo 1.*

the community. The leaders of ecojustice share from their experiences the blessing it is to live the Gospel in the struggle for ecojustice.

Prayer: God of all Creation, You know well our internal and external struggles. Lord, we ask that just as David was determined to fight for justice for his people, that we as your Church can rise up with determination and fight for what is just. Our communities and our entire planet suffer because of contamination and environmental degradation. Help us not lose the ability to become angry and to fight for ecojustice where we have been called to serve. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Fourth Lesson:

Title: *Defeating the Giant in Garrochales, Arecibo*

Memory Verse: Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” 1 Samuel 17:45

Bible Reading 1 Samuel 17: 40-50

Introduction: When I was young and my parents took me for a ride towards the northeast of the island of Puerto Rico, one of the things I enjoyed seeing was the sown fields of pineapple on the #2 road. I have not seen those fields for years, but I did not know the reason for the absence of the pineapple fields I enjoyed so much as a child. In this lesson I understood why they can no longer grow there. The subsoil and underground waters have been contaminated by the nearby industries to the extent that they are no longer viable for planting. The contaminants destroyed the agricultural land.

The soil and subsoil contamination have left trails of weariness, to the point of almost losing faith, but God’s constant help and the support that kept growing gave encouragement and strength to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales of Arecibo and the community. David confronted the giant and defeating him, gained encouragement to continue forward. “This story reveals the eternal battle between the essence of faith in the God of Israel and the essence of paganism, the piety of the spirit against brute force. The faith of a few weak have the opportunity to prevail against the many and powerful. David was the one who affirmed this in his challenge with the powerful. David affirmed this in his challenge with Goliath and will never be forgotten.”²⁹⁶ In the final battle David won, but not because of him, but because the one that gave him strength, wisdom, and the power was God.

The Church and other organizations joined the struggle to stop the incinerator that would be detrimental to their health. The Coalition of Organizations Anti-Incinerator (COAI) together with the ICDC of Garrochales in Arecibo saw the defeat of a giant, but remain alert, praying, and watchful for any new environmental threat to their community. In this lesson we finally see David’s victory and the victory of the community of Arecibo and the ICDC in this struggle for ecojustice.

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson is to learn the strategies that David used to defeat the giant, Goliath and the strategies that the ICDC used to accompany the community and finally defeat the giant of the incinerator, proposed for Arecibo, called Waste to Energy of the Energy Answers

²⁹⁶ Hiliel I. Millegrand, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel*.

Company. David was brave and with resolute faith gives us a great example to follow when we face giants in our lives.

Biblical and Eco-theological Vocabulary:

Incinerator: Incinerating implies carrying out the combustion of organic matter until it becomes ashes. This process is usually used in the treatment of residual solids from urban, industrial, or other sources. The incineration is done in ovens through the process of chemical oxidation. It generates toxic gases which must be treated as dioxins. It does not eliminate the residues completely, which obligates them to have a landfill in which to deposit the ashes, many of them toxic.

Squire: Person assigned to carry weapons.

Sling: (Heb. *qela*) Weapon consisting of leather pouch in the middle of two lengths of cord. To use the sling, it is folded in half and a stone is placed in the fold. The sling is swung in an arc over the head, several times and one cord is released freeing the stone.

Lesson Outline:

- I. Encounter between David and Goliath (v. 40-42)
- II. Duel of words between David and Goliath (v. 43-47)
- III. Decisive battle between David and Goliath (v. 48-49)
- IV. David's victory over the giant, Goliath (v. 50)

Educational Suggestions: This is the last lesson in the series: *Ecojustice Challenges for the Church*. In this class we will try to summarize and integrate what we have learned with this last eco-story of the ICDC in Garrochales of Arecibo and its community. We suggest starting the class with a prayer and reading the entire text. Read the purpose of the lesson and ask several students to read the vocabulary. Do a group exercise: *The Ecojustice*. In groups of four, mention any environmental problem in our community or beyond it that concerns you. Share how you think this giant should be faced. After the group dialogue, ask each group to mention at least one ecojustice challenge and one strategy to face it. Then proceed to the analysis of the Scripture and the application of the Word of God. The Power Point presentation will be helpful with images to illustrate the eco-story of the ICDC in Garrochales in Arecibo and its community.

Take time to reflect on the strategies used by the Churches in the struggles for ecojustice in their communities. With the person next to you, share which strategies you think the ICDC in Garrochales of Arecibo used and which of these did you observe in the other Churches that have fought for ecojustice. Write these common strategies on a card given to you. Then voluntarily mention a concept, word, or idea you remember from the lesson. These concepts are written on a "papergram" (Huge paper sheet). Finish this class with the prayer provided in the lesson.

Scripture Analysis:

Encounter between David and Goliath (v. 40-42): David, leaving Saul's armor aside, again takes what is his, the tools of a shepherd. The tools of war are useless in this battle because God will use David as he is, and not pretending to be someone else. The ability is not in the military weapons but in the power of God. Kuruvilla says that David is going into battle with five items himself: stick, stones, bag, pouch, sling; in other words, an ironic rejection and reversal to the catalogue of

weapons possessed by Goliath.²⁹⁷ The new shepherd of God's people is going to defend the flock being threatened. The stones are smooth, a bit larger than baseballs, and could travel at 100 mph.²⁹⁸ These were the weapons with which the shepherds cared for their flock and these were the ones David would use in the name of the Lord.

Trust in God is the one true resource; God and God alone.²⁹⁹ Finally, the direct encounter between David and Goliath occurs. Although Goliath's impression, when observing David, is one of contempt because of his youth, this impression does not last long. Kuruville says that David's ultimate weapon and resource is Yahweh himself.³⁰⁰ Not only does Goliath's impression of David change but also that of many of Israel including King Saul and David's family.

The ICDC in Garrochales of Arecibo has been supporting the community specifically in opposing the incinerator that would generate more contamination than they have experienced in their community. The Church, with the power of the Lord, has been a paragon in solidarity, support, and accompaniment in the environmental struggles in Arecibo.

Duel of Words between David and Goliath (v. 43-47): In the time of the Biblical story, duels between two soldiers of confronting armies were customary. In a duel between Homeric heroes, the combatants would get closer so they could hear each other. David gets closer to the Philistine and the Philistine gets closer to David. The Philistine speaks to David, without being interrupted, and the David speaks to the Philistine, again without interruption.³⁰¹ Goliath starts his part in the duel, minimizing David's weapons and cursing him; finishes inviting him to get closer so he can convert him into food for birds and beasts. Goliath is silent; it is David's turn. Goliath's sword and lance are useless because David has a superior weapon, "the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."³⁰² David will not fight in his own name but in the name of God of the armies. David's strength comes from his trust in God.³⁰³ David declares the final outcome to Goliath, "the Lord will deliver you into my hand... for the battle *is* the Lord's". David's conviction and faith in God was such that he was convinced that God would not let him down.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales of Arecibo is a church that, as David, continues fighting because its faith is in the liberating God who is faithful and will be on the side of justice, peace and love. The church has been active at its camp against the incinerator in public hearings and raising its voice amid the environmental problems it faces. Ecojustice leader C shared that the community groups with which the church participates always ask for and expect the faith-

²⁹⁷ Abraham Kiruville, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What He is Saying?" 500.

²⁹⁸ Kenneth L. Barker ed, Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 382.

²⁹⁹ Abraham Kiruville, "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?" 502.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Hilel Millegrand, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel*.

³⁰² Abraham Kiruville, David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?" 502.

³⁰³ Kenneth L. Barker ed, Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 382.

based reflection. The accompaniment of the pastor and the Board of Officials were a blessing in this struggle.

Decisive Battle between David and Goliath (v. 48-49): The decisive moment has arrived; they are face to face, David, and Goliath with his squire. David takes the role of the king exchanging the flock of his father for the flock of Israel and crushing the one who threatens the flock.³⁰⁴ When the duel of words ends, Goliath starts toward David, but David did not get scared; on the contrary the Biblical text says he “ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him”. Quickly, David finishes the assault before the giant realizes what is happening. David takes only one stone, puts it in the sling and throws it. A direct shot to the visor of his helmet hits his skull.³⁰⁵ The giant is no longer standing but falls; he could not resist God’s presence, but falls, and the Bible says, “face down”. This image alludes to one of the positions in which gods were worshipped in that time. Goliath falls, not before David, but before the God of Israel that is with David backing up those that trust in Him. David faces Goliath in a way we assume King Saul should have acted. When our trust is put totally in God, we have the determination to go forward because the fight for ecojustice is not ours, but the Lord’s. Ecojustice leader D shares that the weapons of the ICDC in Garrochales of Arecibo are faith and a theology of the care for the environment centered on the Word of God.

David’s Victory over the Giant, Goliath (v. 50): David won; justice won over oppression; faith in God won; the people of God won over the Philistines. The battle was of Yahweh, not David’s, nor Saul’s, nor Goliath’s.³⁰⁶ God won and gave the victory to David and his people. The people of God must develop the stature of a heart for God and, exercise faith to confront enemies in the name of the Lord.³⁰⁷ David defeated the giant that was protected by an “impenetrable” armor, a sword, a spear, a javelin, a height of nine feet nine inches, experienced in war and with a squire before him. David lacked human power, but God was with him and this was more than sufficient. God wants us to be leaders with complete confidence in Him, people unafraid of multinational giants, multimillionaires with the ideology of capital over health and human dignity. God is with us, with the poor and needy to do justice. David has given us a great lesson in faith, confidence in God, and determination for just causes and for fighting against all oppression. The ICDC in Garrochales of Arecibo and its community also won in the name of the Lord. Ecojustice leaders of the church were also leaders in the movement against the incinerator proposed for Arecibo. They, as David, trusted and continued with firm determination doing their part and God did what appeared to be impossible. The incinerator project proposed for Arecibo by the Energy Answers company was denied and both the community and the church saw this giant defeated in the name of the Lord. May God help us develop the stature, resources, and experiences of those that trust God and God

³⁰⁴ Abraham Kiruville, “David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?” 104.

³⁰⁵ Hilel Miligrand, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel*, 183.

³⁰⁶ Abraham Kiruville, David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with what he is saying?” 505.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 506.

alone, for after all, the battle is the Lord's.³⁰⁸ God will always support the just causes because He is the God of all justice.

Application: *Facing the Giant.* The struggle of the community of Garrochales is not limited to the opposition of the construction of the “Waste to Energy” plant but transcends beyond this situation due to the multiple environmental problems that affect the community of Arecibo. One of the ecojustice leaders tells us that they face contamination problems because of the landfill in Arecibo that affects the “Tiburones” Channel and the underground waters, air pollution due to winds contaminated with chemicals from the pharmaceutical companies in nearby towns and from the clandestine biochemical incinerators. In addition to these problems, there is lead contamination in Arecibo because of the “Battery Recycling Company”, a facility that generates dust contaminated with lead during the activity of processing the batteries. In this process the workers have taken dust contaminated with lead on their clothes to their homes exposing families and others.³⁰⁹ Lead is a contaminant that affects people's health.

Also, the community has suffered throughout history because of the nearby pharmaceutical companies. Hunter and Arbona say that in September of 1982 there was a toxic spill of the UpJohn Company of Barceloneta (in the “Bo. Sabana Hoyos” of Arecibo) that manufactured antibiotics and 57,000 l were spilled into the ground and underground waters. Due to this the drinking water well had to be closed. The company had to take remedial measures and provide connections of safe drinking water for the community of Garrochales.³¹⁰ This is so severe that these and other contaminating events that large areas of land and subsoil have been made unfit for agriculture. The large extensions of land in the North where pineapple was produced are not used because the land and underground water have been affected. The community and the church have felt the onslaught of contamination on the health of the people and the ecosystem. Because of this, and for the dignity of the people and the Earth, the community and the church became angry and opposed the project that would harm the delicate ecosystem of the area of Arecibo.

The struggle against the incinerating plant, proposed by Energy Answers, started several years ago. On December 3rd, 2010, a public notice appeared in the “Primera Hora” newspaper announcing that Energy Answers proposed the “construction and operation of a plant for the generation of renewable energy and retrieval of resources in the Bo. Cambalache of Arecibo”.³¹¹ This incinerator would burn 2,100 tons of solid wastes per day, generating contaminants such as toxic ash and other substances including lead and dioxins in an area already contaminated with high levels of lead in the air.³¹² In addition, the project proposed to extract 2.1 million gallons of

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ “Epa Multa a The Battery Recycling Co. por Contaminación con Plomo en Arecibo.”

³¹⁰ John M. Hunter y Sonia I. Arbona. *Paradise Lost: An Introduction to the Geography of Water Pollution in Puerto Rico, 1346-1347.*

³¹¹ Enrique González Conty, “Alerta Roja: Incinerador en Arecibo.”

³¹² Juan Manuel Torres, “Energy Answers Incinerator Poisoning Main Agricultural Region”, 1.

water daily from wetland in the area of the Tiburones Channel that is critical to the protection of the island against cyclonic tides. This wetland already affected by the landfill of Arecibo does not need the additional burden on its ecosystem. The community has lived and suffered the environmental problems and have suffered the consequences of sin against Nature. We will see how the ICDC in Arecibo was God's instrument in this process of bringing ecojustice to the community of Arecibo.

Strategies from the Church to Defeat the Giant of the Waste to Energy Plant: The church continued sharing its faith and the theology of care for the environment and supporting environmental groups that were against the incinerator. The church was educated by means of sermons related to caring for the environment, conferences, educational pro-environment talks, educational programs involving children with Creation Explorers. One of the ecojustice leaders tells us the church developed projects such as God's Bushel and God's Protection; the first, to share harvests with the brothers and sisters and the second, to provide clothing for whoever needed it.³¹³ Ecojustice leader D shared that an eco-friendly theology was developed; a long-term Christian education process. The church has worked wisely planting the seed of care for Creation. "Faith and the testimony of other churches helped us maintain hope" said Ecojustice leader D. As with David, the panorama was complicated, but David continued towards the goal and the ICDC in Garrochales, Arecibo also collaborated in making their facilities available for the community, affirmed Ecojustice leader C. This same Ecojustice leader C shared that the church also joined the Camp against the incinerator, has organized ecumenical workshops, has visited the Camp against the incinerator and has stayed alert with the parishioners of Penuelas. In the same way, Ecojustice leader C participates actively in the Citizens for the Environment Group and informs the congregation of developments in the environmental area. The ICDC of Arecibo has been present in peaceful protests. Ecojustice leader C tells us that the church supported the peaceful protests. Ecojustice leader E said that the church was willing to get involved from the moment it heard of this issue. In the struggle for ecojustice in Arecibo, they were obliged to use the legal option of going to court to exert pressure and present arguments explaining why the incinerator could not be established there, affirmed Ecojustice leader E. In this struggle, as God was with David, He is with the ICDC and its community. The church, in this confidence and certainty, continued to support the effort of caring for Creation.

Defeating the Giant/ Praying and Watching: The support of the community and the church continued growing. Organizations and voices were joining to help oppose the incinerator project in Arecibo. Both the Association and the Federation of Mayors of Puerto Rico rejected the project.³¹⁴ The organization, CAMBIO, also supported the struggle and presented speeches in various public hearings. In the same manner, the Faculty of the Graduate School of Public Health, Biosocial Science Division and the Graduate School of Medical Science of the University of Puerto Rico expressed its rejection of the incinerator project in a resolution against the incineration

³¹³ Hannah Chang, "How a Polluter is Capitalizing on Disaster in Puerto Rico"

³¹⁴ Ibid.

of wastes.³¹⁵ Part of the resolution establishes that it is opposed to the installation of incinerators of solid wastes in Puerto Rico considering it is not the best option because of the risks that affect health and the environment.³¹⁶ The representative, Luis Gutierrez of the House of Representatives of the United States also expressed his opposition to the project when he affirmed that it would generate more contamination, it is planned behind the people's backs and no one knows who will pay for the project. The representative also states that the project's emissions would worsen the area already affected by high levels of lead.³¹⁷ For these valid reasons and in demand for information in the legal courts this struggle continued. For the glory of God, the project was cancelled, understanding it was not viable.

Summary: The final victory in the fight between David and Goliath is an example of faith, of a continuous process in the confidence of knowing that God is the one with the power to defeat the giants that come into our lives. We cannot fight the giants alone; we must go into battle in the name of the Lord. As David, we must affirm, “for the battle *is* the Lord's, and He will give all of you into our hands.” (1 Samuel 17:47 NIV)

The ICDC in Garrochales, Arecibo and the community could see how the giant was defeated in the name of the Lord. The Energy Answers project and the Waste to Energy plant were not materialized. The Coalition of Organizations Anti-Incinerator (COAI) handed out information affirming their rejection of the incinerator because of the contaminants and they promoted recycling, reusing, and reducing solid wastes.

The environmental struggles for ecojustice are of gigantic proportions but the God which we believe in and serve is on the side of ecojustice and opposes the sin against Nature that generates oppression and disease. The Church of Christ should continue to seek the Kingdom of God and its justice by supporting the community when it is fighting for ecojustice like the ICDC did in Garrochales, Arecibo.

Prayer: Loving God, who loves us with eternal love, thank you because all Creation is groaning so your children can manifest themselves. Thank you for the testimony of faith and determination of the ICDC churches in Hato Nuevo, Dorado, and Arecibo and the testimony of the United Evangelical Church in Penuelas. Thank you for these sister congregations and for what we have been able to learn from each one. Guide us, dear Lord, in the struggle for ecojustice in our community in Toa Alta. Help us to continue giving testimony of your love, justice, and peace for all Creation.

³¹⁵ Ingrid M. Vila y Luis E. Rodríguez, *Ponencia ante Departamento de Agricultura Federal, Vista Pública, Borrador de Declaración de Impacto Ambiental Incinerador de Arecibo*, 3.

³¹⁶ Facultad de la Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública, Recinto de Ciencias Médicas, Universidad de Puerto Rico, “Resolución en Contra de la Incineración de Desperdicios.”

³¹⁷ Ibid.

APPENDIX C

Questionnaires

Eco Justice Group Interview

Thank you for your time and availability to participate in this process. The information that you would like to share here is confidential and only for research purposes of this study. The first part will include some questions about yourself. The second part will consist of answering questions related to the theme we are studying.

I. Demographic and Congregation information:

- a. To what age range you belong?
 0-17 18-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61 or more
- b. Gender:
 Male Female
- c. To which congregation do you belong?
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Hato Nuevo, Guaynabo, PR
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Espinosa, Dorado, PR
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garrochales, Arecibo, PR
 United Church of Christ in Tallaboa, Peñuelas, PR
- d. How many years have you been in your congregation?
 1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more
- e. Do you live near your congregation?
 Yes No
- f. If you answered yes to the last question, please tell us how many years you have lived in the church's town:
 1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more

II. Interview Questions for the Eco-Justice Group:

- a. Take your time to reflect and answer the following questions:
1. Are there environmental issues affecting the communities around your congregation?

2. If you answered yes to question one, is your church responding to the environmental issues you named? If so, what motivations do they give for being involved?
3. If your church is responding to the issues named, are they finding ways to engage with the surrounding community in their responses?
4. If you have answered yes to the above, describe the strategies that your church uses in addressing this problem.
5. Have you personally taken part in your church's response? If so, in what ways?
6. Do you notice some type of resistance inside the congregation in participating in eco-justice issues?
7. If resistance occurred, how did the church deal with it?
8. What did you, as a leader, learn from your church in this process?
9. Would you say that your efforts have resulted in any changes or improvements in the situations named?
10. What resources have helped you maintain hope in confronting environmental problems?
11. Do you consider responding to environmental challenges is an aspect of your faith as a Christian?

Thank you for your participation.

Toa Alta Congregation Questionnaire

Thank you for your time and availability to participate in this process. The information that you would share is confidential and only for research purposes for this study. The first part will include some questions about yourself as a member of the congregation in Toa Alta Pueblo. The second part will consist of answering questions related to the theme we are studying.

III. Demographic and Congregation information:

- a. To what age group do you belong:
 0-17 18-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61 or more
- b. Gender:
 Male Female
- c. How many years you have been in Toa Alta congregation?
 1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more
- d. Do you live in Toa Alta town?
 Yes No
- e. If you answered “yes” to the last question, please tell us how many years you have living in Toa Alta:
 1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more

IV. Please choose the best description of your attitudes toward each statement:

- | | Totally
Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Totally
Disagree |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. The Bible teaches about creation care. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. Good stewardship includes creation care. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. The Church has a responsibility to care for creation. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. I am familiar with the teachings of eco-theology. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | Totally
Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Totally
Disagree |
|--|------------------|-------|---------|----------|---------------------|
| e. As a Christian I have had spiritual experiences with God through contemplating nature. | [] | [] | [] | [] | [] |
| f. Helping our community is part of the church's responsibility. | [] | [] | [] | [] | [] |
| g. The Church must be involved in environmental struggles for justice in the community | [] | [] | [] | [] | [] |
| h. As a Christian I must look for ways to minimize my impact on the environment in my home. | [] | [] | [] | [] | [] |
| i. The church must adapt to changes that benefit the environment as a good Christian stewardship practice. | [] | [] | [] | [] | [] |
- V. Please answer the following questions:
- a. What the Bible says about creation care?
 - b. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "eco-theology"?
 - c. What does the term "eco-justice" mean to you?
 - d. Can you mention the environmental problems that you know exist in Toa Alta?
 - e. Do you know about other churches' advocacy efforts for ecojustice for the community?
 - f. Can you envision any form of support from our church for the ecojustice challenges that face Toa Alta?

Thank you so much for your participation

Final Interview Questions for Toa Alta Focus Groups

Thank you for your time and availability to participate in this process. The information that you would like to share here is confidential and only for research purposes of this study. The first part will include some questions about yourself as a member of the congregation in Toa Alta Pueblo. The second part will consist of answering questions related to the theme we are studying.

VI. Demographic and Congregation information:

a. To what age range you belong:

0-17 18-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61 or

more

b. Gender:

Male Female

c. How many years you have been in Toa Alta congregation?

1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more

d. Do you live in Toa Alta town?

Yes No

e. If you answered yes to the last question, please tell us how many years you have living in Toa Alta:

1-5 6-15 16-30 31-50 51 or more

VII. Interview Questions for the Learning Process in Eco-Justice and Hope of Toa Alta Group. Take your time to reflect and answer the following questions:

1. What impressions do you have after participating in the series of lessons about eco-justice issues in four churches in Puerto Rico?

2. Is there one of the congregations studied whose efforts you admire and why?

3. Do you think differently about the church's responsibility toward environmental problems than you did before this study?

4. What did you learn about eco-theology through this process?

5. What did you learn about eco-justice from this process?

6. What interventions do you think fit in our own situation and in our response as church in the community's environmental problems?

7. Do you think some of the interventions made by the eco-justice churches should be considered in our church and situation regarding the landfill contamination in Toa Alta?

8. What did you learn about hope in this process?

9. What actions do you believe can bring hope to our situation regarding the Toa Alta landfill?

10. Share other insights related to the learning process through the experiences of these four churches with ecojustice in their communities.

Thank you for your participation

Rules for Focus Group Interviews

It is an honor and privileged for your participation with these focus group interviews. Your support will be greatly grateful for you and the other participants. This is an opportunity to learn in a collaborative learning process by each church that is participating. We would like to share with you the following guidelines for our focus group gathering.

1. At the beginning of our interview, you will have the questionnaire accessible and answered by you.
2. We would like that everyone has the opportunity to participate.
3. We want to have the focus group gathering as a conversation that everyone has the chance to participate.
4. During the gathering, please maintain and express in a respectful manner.
5. Every church member may consult with members of their church their answers.
6. To guarantee that everyone can participate, and we have two hours and a half, please maintain your answers should be a maximum of three minutes long.
7. We want you to please share your thoughts that had been given you by the Wisdom of God to protect His creation and the privilege to know other churches that had work with communities on ecojustice.
8. We want you to feel free and share what God has shown you through the journey to preserve His creation.

God bless you!

Por: Rvda. Sary N. Rosario
Student Investigator
Doctor in Ministry
Brite Divinity School
Texas Christian University

APPENDIX D

PROJECT BUDGET

Investigation Project:

STORIES OF HOPE; CHURCH INTERVENTIONS FOR ECOJUSTICE AND THE
CHALLENGE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS REGARDING THE TOA ALTA
LANDFILL

Primary Investigator: Dr. Timothy H. Robinson
 Student Investigator: Rev. Sary N. Rosario-Ferreira
 Brite Divinity School
 Texas Christian University

Period May 2019- October 2019

Gas Expenses for transportation

- a. Hato Nuevo \$60 b. Arecibo \$90 c. Espinosa \$60 d. Peñuelas \$115

Materials for Audiovisual

- a. SD UP 64 GB \$17.20 + IVU= \$19.80
 b. SanDisk 64 GB \$24.99 +IVU= \$27.86
 c. Easy Store Portable Hardware Drive \$49.99 +IVU= \$55.74

Note Takers in Ecojustice Focus Group Interview

- a. \$30 b. \$30

Camera Recording Person:

- a. \$40

Editors

- a. Revision \$60 b. Translation of Bible Series Lessons on Ecojustice \$900.00
 b. Editor Revision \$500.00

Other Materials

- a. Sharpener \$12.16 + IVU= \$13.56

Food and Beverages

- a. Ecofriendly glasses, plates and cutlery \$19.06
 b. Food for 3 Focus Groups \$300 (Ecojustice \$200/Toa Alta AM\$60/Toa Alta PM \$40)

Total Expenses: \$2,321.02

APPENDIX E

TABLES

TABLE GRID FOR ECOJUSTICE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Questions	Hato Nuevo Guaynabo	Tallaboa Encarnación Peñuelas	Espinosa Dorado	Garrochales Arecibo
1. Are there environmental issues affecting the communities around your congregation?				
2. If you answered yes to question one, is your church responding to the environmental issues you named? If so, what motivations do they give for being involved?				
3. If your church is responding to the issues named, are they finding ways to engage with the surrounding community in their responses?				
4. If you have answered yes to the above, describe the strategies that your church uses in addressing this problem.				
5. Have you personally taken part in your church's response? If so, in what ways?				
6. Do you notice any types of resistance inside the congregation in participating in eco-justice issues?				
7 If resistance occurred, how did the church deal with it?				
8. What did you, as a leader, learn from your church in this process?				
9. Would you say that your efforts have resulted in any changes or improvements in the situations named?				
10. What resources have helped you maintain hope in confronting environmental problems?				
11. Do you consider responding to environmental challenges as an aspect of your faith as a Christian?				

Table: Description of attitudes toward each statement before and after the Series Lesson in Ecojustice in the Toa Alta Congregation (Second Part of the Pre and Post Questionnaire):

Statement	Totally Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Totally Disagree	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
a. The Bible teaches about creation care.										
b. Good stewardship includes creation care.										
c. The Church has a responsibility to care for creation.										
d. I am familiar with the teachings of eco-theology.										
e. As a Christian I have had spiritual experiences with God through contemplating nature.										
f. Helping our community is part of the church's responsibility.										
g. The Church must be involved in environmental struggles for justice in the community.										
h. As a Christian I must look for ways to minimize my impact on the environment in my home.										
i. The church must adapt to changes that benefit the environment as a good Christian stewardship practice.										

Table: Answers for the Third Part of Pre and Post Toa Alta Congregation Questionnaires

Note: Numbers reflect the quantity of time a phrase or word was repeated. No number assigned means that it was mentioned only once.

Question	Pre-Questionnaire	Post-Questionnaire
a. What the Bible says about creation care?		
b. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "eco-theology"?		
c. What does the term "eco-justice" mean to you?		
d. Can you mention the environmental problems that you know exist in Toa Alta?		
e. Do you know about other churches' advocacy efforts for ecojustice for the community?		
f. Can you envision any form of support from our church for the ecojustice challenges that face Toa Alta?		

Table: Answers for the Toa Alta Focus Group Interviews AM and PM

Question	Toa Alta Focus Group AM	Toa Alta Focus Group PM
1. What impressions do you have after participating in the series of lessons about eco-justice issues in four churches in Puerto Rico?		
2. Is there one of the congregations studied whose efforts you admire and why?		
3. Do you think differently about the church's responsibility toward environmental problems than you did before this study?		
4. What did you learn about eco-theology through this process?		
5. What did you learn about eco-justice from this process?		
6. What interventions do you think fit in our own situation and in our response as church in the community's environmental problems?		
7. Do you think some of the interventions made by the eco-justice churches should be considered in our church and situation regarding the landfill contamination in Toa Alta?		
8. What did you learn about hope in this process?		
9. What actions do you believe can bring hope to our situation regarding the Toa Alta landfill?		
10. Share other insights related to the learning process through the experiences of these four churches with ecojustice in their communities.		

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