



# Responsible Public Theology on Climate Change Devastations: Disastrous flooding in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Jonas Sello Thinane\*, Mnyalaza Tobias Masuku, Elijah Baloyi,  
Wessel Bentley, Linda Wendy Naicker, Sifiso Khuzwayo, Rabson Hove  
College of Human Sciences (CHS), Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR)  
University of South Africa (UNISA)  
South Africa thinajs@unisa.ac.za

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.424>

## Abstract

Climate change is devastating human communities, but it is more devastating to the poor and powerless, especially in the absence of accountable political leadership. This was evident in the recent climate disaster that struck South Africa in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), where the deadliest storm in April 2022 killed about 489 people and devastated many more. This paints a frightening picture of the impending climate apocalypse not only in South Africa but in the global world. In the face of mounting evidence that the threat of climate change is indeed existential, this paper represents a tacit theological obligation to warn nations or sensitize governments to the impending climate catastrophe. Responsible public theology as per this paper's version calls for pragmatic government policies and a renewed church mission for human security in the face of the looming climate crisis. Although unrelated to the phenomenon of climate change, the Genesis flood narrative is used by analogy to describe the church's mission in the face of the climate crisis encompassing floods. A particular focus is the impact of the environmental and climate change crisis on the impoverished masses living in low-lying risk areas, as was the case with KZN. Given that there seems to be little theological reflection or intensity on this question, this paper represents a potential area for further research that will foster theologically informed dialogue on impacts of climate change.

**Keywords:** Responsible Theology, South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal, Climate Change, Climate Devastations, Human Security, Impoverished Masses,

## Introduction

Most religions in the global space share the view that climate change remains an extremely serious and urgent problem that poses challenges to modern societies. The basis of this urgency lies in the belief that the transcendental Divine or God created the earth and placed it in the care of humanity. As a result, much religious attention has been given to the role that believers and non-believers alike play or should play as stewards of the earth in preventing or, at worst, managing the undesirable effects of climate change. Such impacts have been observed around the world, including in the sub-Saharan region, where within just six weeks of three tropical cyclones and two tropical storms hitting Southeast Africa, the eastern coast of South Africa was also affected. In early April 2022, the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal experienced extreme rainfall, with the city of Durban being hardest hit. These floods destroyed thousands of homes, caused unplanned displacements and claimed the lives of more than 400 people. This disaster not only sparked images of the Genesis Flood, but also revealed the sad reality that 30 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa continues to struggle with structural inequalities and frontline communities remain the hardest hit by natural disasters.



As climate change remains an important topic in academia, the connection between environmental issues and religion has been studied in depth (Hayes & Marangudakis, 2000; Kanagy & Nelsen, 1995). To this end, Christian public theology engages larger society and governmental authorities in the search for societal well-being and common good in the face of climate change and its resulting impacts (Pearson, 2010). On the other hand, or more broadly, responsible public theology underscores humanity's responsibility in protecting the common good from or in the face of climate change impacts such as deadly floods. In other words, responsible public theology involves recognizing humanity's responsibility not only to protect the earth but also to deal with environmental problems while promoting social justice. It examines the intersection between religious beliefs, public life and the role that religious communities should play in promoting responsible responses to climate change. Acknowledging that climate change is indeed existential, as evidenced by the catastrophic flooding in KZN in April 2022 since the 1840s, this paper represents responsible public theological dialogue aimed at raising urgent awareness of the looming impacts of climate change, particularly on frontline communities. Responsible public theology, in the spirit of this paper, calls for pragmatic government policies and a renewed church mission for human security in the face of natural crises and their severity in poor frontline communities.

Responsible public theology, discussed above, first begins by recognizing the interrelationship between religion and climate change, a connection that then articulates responsible public theology on the issue of environmental and climate change challenges. The Genesis flood story is used to evoke images of natural disasters in the form of floods that destroy human lives on a large scale, especially when left with no imaginable safety or, as it were, without the Ark of Salvation. To this end, eco-theology is used to recognize environmental responsibility as a moral and spiritual ethic, particularly in South Africa's post-colonial and post-Covid-19 context. Consequently, the discourse of this paper focuses on the urgency of the theology of environmental mission as the new category within church missionary work, particularly in light of the plight of frontline communities that continue to bear the worst impacts of climate change. The prophetic environmental mission, as considered in this article within the framework of responsible public theology, is thus made the responsibility of the whole church to the plight of frontline communities in South Africa and elsewhere.

In order to advance the above discussions, this paper draws on the available literature or review literature, which first underscores the discussions about religion and climate change. This literature is examined to show, in part, that climate change or its impacts are relevant to religious communities in general and Christian theology in particular and is a topic that is constantly being studied and developed. Secondly, there follows a discussion on the impact of the environment on climate change. Third, Genesis 6-7 is introduced in a way that is detached from climate change but still has similarities in terms of reality and the effects of flooding on human life. Fourth, or somewhat equivalent, describes the 2022 KZN flood and highlights its direct impact on affected communities. This will then demonstrate the relevance of eco-theology in relation to climate change and essentially set the stage for the church's prophetic mission in relation to the marginalized communities amidst climate change effects such as floods. Consequently, the conclusion of this paper is that while the effects of climate change are enormous on human life, they are far worse for poor communities as subjects of church mission and beneficiaries of responsible public theology.

## **Religion and Climate Change**

To the extent that climate change or its effects are linked to human behavior, climate change in a broader sense is linked to religion in its adaptation to socio-cultural systems (Haluza-DeLay, 2014:261-279). In the words of Jenkins, Berry and Kreider (2018): 'Insofar as climate change is entangled with humans, it is also entangled with all the ways in which religion attends human ways of being' (Jenkins, Berry & Kreider, 2018:85). This means that while the



reality linking the reach of religion and climate change may sometimes be less obvious, its existential nature is unavoidable and therefore requires exploration. The same sentiment had been observed in Hulme (2014) as he stated succinctly: 'Religious engagement with climate change is both necessary and inevitable (Hulme, 2014:14). Consequently, the unavoidability or inevitability of this inquiry led to a research agenda examining how religious institutions and practices or beliefs harness the reality of climate change. To this end, public theology, which encompasses Christian dialogue in the field of public affairs, emphasizes the application of Christian beliefs to issues affecting society as a whole, which include climate change among others.

In broad terms, public theology refers to what one might call or see as Christian engagement with public affairs. This dialogue or engagement is framed within the Christian beliefs, principles, and values as they apply to issues that impact the society at large. It recognizes Christian spirituality as bearing the mandate of social responsibility in the public sphere. As such, the aims of public theology as far as the discourse on climate change is concerned, is to heavily rely upon Christian teachings or perspectives to enrich public debates. That being said however, while the broad understanding of public theology encourages Christian public participation or engagement with public affairs, responsible public theology by extension emphasizes the need for responsibility in the application of public theology. Responsible public theology is largely guided by honesty, accountability, integrity and uncompromising truthfulness in its approach to public affairs, among other values.

Responsible public theology, when applied to public affairs in general, or to public affairs that embrace the reality of climate change and its impact on human life, underscores the required attitude of integrity, accountability, and uncompromising truthfulness. That is, responsible public theology, however unconventional it may be in this article, calls for integrity in dealing with public affairs, particularly on issues related to climate change and its impact on frontline communities. To this end, the well-being of society as a whole is not trumped by the importance of religion, but on the contrary: religious teachings express or tend to express attitudes that protect the well-being of society as a whole. By focusing Christian teachings on the enrichment of societal action, responsible public theology approaches the discourse on climate change with a sense of responsibility guided by ethical principles. These guiding principles include, but are not limited to, justice, trustworthiness, honesty, and adhering to golden values such as fairness and loving others as if you love yourself. In other words, or in terms of responsible public theology, when on one side of the septum what might be called irresponsible theology solemnly ascribes the effects of climate change to divine warnings and judgment (Cox et al., 2018; Ergül et al., 2010). At the other end of this spectrum, responsible public theology is more realistic in that it articulates or relates human action to climate and its deadly effects.

### **Environment and Climate Change**

The environmental impact of climate change is already visible in the increasing frequency of natural disasters manifesting globally. It is estimated that the mean annual temperatures have increased with a global average of 0.65 degrees Celsius over the past 5 decades (Ziervogel et al., 2014:605). It has been well established that a direct correlation exists between the rise in global temperatures and the increased frequency of natural disasters. Although the projections for Sub-Saharan Africa are to experience more prolonged droughts as a result of climate change, above average rainfall has frequently left this region at the mercy of sporadic floods as was seen in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa in 2022 (Grab & Nash, 2023:19). Although it can be argued that floods are not new to this region, it is estimated that the return period of such events in KZN has halved in the past century, now occurring at the severity experienced in 2022 on average every 20 years, instead of 40 years.



Climate change is largely attributed to the emissions produced by a variety of human activities, including burning fossil fuels, deforestation, improper waste management, energy production, and many other activities. South Africa cannot ascertain blame for its share of natural disasters precipitated by climate change only to the global superpowers. It too is guilty of contributing towards this global crisis. When it comes to the use of fossil fuels and the emissions associated with this form of energy generation, South Africa is recognised as being the highest consumer of coal in Sub-Saharan Africa, with CO<sub>2</sub> emissions accounting for about 1% of the global total (Joshua & Bekun, 2020:9436). The main driver for the excessive use of coal-energy is the dramatic economic expansion that took place after the country's transition in 1994 (Joshua & Bekun, 2020:9437). With a rapidly expanding economy in the early 1990's, came the need for increased production, fuelled by the social demand for employment, increased living standards and the correction of social inequalities. Economic expansion was so significant that between 1990 and 2016, South Africa's Greenhouse Gas Emissions have increased by approximately 70% (Zheng et al., 2019:1127). Although recent developments in policy change raise hopes to steer the country towards greener power generation capacity to ensure acceptable emissions levels, much more needs to be done.

As the adage goes: "You can have anything you want, as long as you pay for it." South Africa did not only want development, it needed development, and the cost came primarily at the expense of the environment. Needless to say, the debt incurred to Mother Nature is being repaid (again) by the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. Not only are the poor more vulnerable in the face of natural disasters such as excessive rain and drought, but have to brave the rapid increase in the cost of commodities as climate change is affecting food production and security in this region. In a study measuring the output of food production in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1974-2008, Ray et.al. (Ray et al., 2019:5) estimate that in Sub-Saharan Africa the following decreases in production can be noted:

- Maize: 5.8%
- Sugarcane: 3.9%

Gains in heat- and drought resistant crops, however, have increased marginally as per the following examples:

- 0.7% sorghum
- Cassava: 1.7%

These increases are negligible in a context of a growing population, as the majority of the population depend largely on finding food security in the crops that are negatively affected. It comes then as no surprise that over the past two decades, overall food calories in this region have dropped by ~1.4%, due to climate change (Ray et al., 2019:5). Climate change is affecting the environment, which in turn manifests in frequent natural disasters and conditions that are not favourable for producing food security for the greater population. As climate change becomes more pronounced, the effects on the environment will only be exacerbated, leading to greater social problems. Nasr (1967), who highlights the environmental challenges arising from or resulting from climate change, finds more expression or is repeated by Nche (2020) articulating:

The ecological crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values and that religions being the primary sources of values in any culture are hereby implicated in the decisions humans make regarding the environment (Nche, 2020:222–223)

The values in this case are the placing a priority on economic development at the expense of the environmental impact of such activities. Of course the region needs economic growth, for without it poverty, suffering and need will only increase. Religions as significant role-players in social welfare should of course endorse activities that promote well-being, but cannot do so while turning a blind eye to the consequences such activities may have on the broader ecological context. It seems, though, that this is precisely what has been taking place. Religion



is not taking significant note of the environmental crisis brought about by climate change. Nche (2020) argues that there may be theological barriers (especially in Christianity) to engaging with the notion of anthropogenic climate change (Nche, 2020:229-230). First of all, many Christians may not consider climate change as an existential problem, but is rather a fulfilment of end-time prophecies as dictated in their eschatological beliefs. Rather than addressing and remedying climate change, it is embraced as part of their faith conviction. Second, many Christians still hold on to the belief of their rights as those given divine dominion by God to use nature for their own benefit, citing passages such as Genesis 1:26-28 to endorse their perspective. Third, many Christians subject themselves to a form of theological fatalism, believing that natural disasters etc. form part of the world's divinely orchestrated destiny. Lastly, many Christians, adopting a form of Biblical literalism are sceptical of the notion of anthropogenic climate change, believing that Scripture provides sufficient truth for existence and living, placing less value on insights brought by science.

In the wake of this discussion, it should be noted that a Christian narrative is needed which takes cognisance of the impact climate change has on the environment. It needs a soteriology which addresses the responsibility humankind has in contributing to this crisis and how 'salvation' concerns not only one's eternal 'destiny', but more immediately our existential experience of life. A Christian narrative that takes seriously the scientific observation of the consequences of climate change, environmentally, socially and economically is required for the Church to remain relevant in a world where the effects of climate change are creeping increasingly closer to home. For this reason, the flood story recorded in Genesis, while not indicative of the dynamics of climate change, nonetheless conjures up images of natural disasters resulting in numerous human casualties, especially without rescue efforts or, so to speak, the Ark of Redemption.

### **Genesis Flood and Climate Change**

Public theology depends on how scripture is interpreted as part of the discourse in addressing or responding to contextual issues. It relates to how God or the deity is understood to be acting in public sphere. In the case of responsible public theology toward flood related to climate change, one section of scripture that comes to mind is the Genesis Flood in Genesis 6-7. Although this story of the floods in the Bible story does not have scientific evidence to directly connect it with the present-day occurrence of natural disasters and particularly the floods that continue to ravage the global world including Southern Africa. The recent floods include the cyclone Idai that displaced 4.5 million people and left more than a thousand people dead and others missing and unaccounted for (Phiri, Simwanda & Nyirenda, 2021). The effects of Cyclone Idai caused substantial damages to human life, homes and property and the environment in general (Phiri, Simwanda & Nyirenda, 2021). It mostly affected Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, some parts of Zambia and South Africa. Besides cyclone Idai, local floods are commonly experienced in South African provinces of Eastern Cape, KwaZulu- Natal, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and North West. These are as a result of climate change caused by human behaviour. When these floods occur, people are reminded and tempted to connect them with the floods in the Genesis story.

In the Genesis flood story, humanity was wicked to the core; the heart, thoughts and intentions are described as continually wicked (Genesis 6:5). God could not further tolerate the extent of human sin (Ntrel, 2012). God promised Noah that he was going to destroy the earth and all creation because of the sin of disobedience, corruption and violence (Genesis 6:11-13). It is argued that God used the flood to avenge blood violence committed by the people of time of Noah in order to wipe out corruption and pollution that was rampant on earth (Wilson, 2017). The new depth of sinful nature of humanity caused pain before God such that he declared universal punishment on earth. God used floods to punish violent murderers and cleansed the earth of corruption. The Genesis floods were extended to 40 days and 40 nights, destroying



and blotted out humanity and every living creature which was outside the Noah's ark (Davidson, 2004). Genesis then reads: 'Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark' (Genesis 7:23). The reason for annihilation of humanity and creation was as a result of human behaviour that provoked God to anger.

The idea of modern climate change, particularly when it involves cyclones, Tropical storms and mass flooding as indicated earlier on, is closely related to the biblical story the Genesis floods in terms of the symbolism it represents. Generally, people tend to believe that natural disasters are God's response to human wickedness and injustices in the world such as domestic violence, gender-based violence, political violence, murder and general oppression of the poor of the land. Lee (1999) argues that God brings natural disasters as a way of disciplining them for crime and violence (Lee, 1999:204,206). A similar opinion is expressed by several scholars, who analogously connect natural disasters with the wrath of God as punishment for world injustices, which include human wickedness (Ntrel, 2012; Hirono & Blake, 2017, Karlsson et al., 2019). According to Ntrel (2012) also argues that, 'Africans have held this view for the longest time that such events are caused by God due to some "sin" of the people' (Ntrel, 2012:99). The idea of sin and punishment entrenches a theology of retribution that may cause paralysis in formulating responsible public theology in the context of climate change.

It is an undeniable fact that climate change is due small-scale and large-scale pollution that affect mother nature as a result of human behaviour. But to link the calamities of climate change to the Genesis flood is being extremist. It can only cause people to blame God's anger and fail to respond to the climate change in a more responsible way. According to Ayeb-Karlsson et al. (2019), people who think the calamity is God's retribution for sin, for instance, could not see any reason to run away when disaster strikes. Such beliefs and behaviour are usually caused by the interpretation of the Genesis floods, linking sin, God's anger and God avenging sin with floods while saving the faithful like Noah. Although Noah could not take all creatures into the ark, he managed to embrace some of them symbolizing his relation to creation during and post- flood era (Genesis 6:18-22) (Ibita, 2020). This helps to draw helpful public theology in response to climate change. This is in line with observations by Hirono and Black (2017) stating that, God who judges is the God who also protects and saves the human and creation. God cares and uses humanity to take care of him creation. In the context of modern-day climate change and natural disasters there is need for pastoral care of presence and accompaniment. Hirono and Blake (2017) puts it: 'for many Christian clergies, a ministry of presence, that has a symbolic connection to the divine, is key. In many cases, clergy himself or herself is a symbol' (Hirono & Blake, 2017:6). There is need for Christian education on faith, creation and ecology from the grassroots congregations in rural areas, townships and urban centres. Such education must not only enrich religious communities such as churches, but must also find corrective expression in secular educational systems. Instead of interpreting the behaviour of omission and any other human actions that disturb the environment as sin, they need to be regarded as violation against the environment that can be addressed (Ntrel, 2012). This helps people to accept responsibility and learning to correct their behaviour with hope that nature can be promoted in order to reduce occurrences of floods and other natural disasters. The church and theologians can interpret scripture in general and the Genesis floods story in particular in ways that provide public theology that prevent human paralysis in face of climate change and promote communion of humanity and nature.

## **2022 KwaZulu Natal Floods**

The April 2022 floods in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) devastated and shook not only the country but the international community as well. On 11–12 April 2022, parts of the KZN coastal zone



received more than 300 mm of rain within twenty four hours – 24hrs. The floods were initially declared as a Provincial Disaster on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 but this was reviewed to a National Disaster on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 in accordance with the Disaster Management Act of 2002 (eThekweni MCES, 2022:2). A disaster “means a progressive or sudden, widespread or localised natural or human-caused occurrence which- (a) causes or threatens to cause- (i) death, injury or disease; (ii) damage to property, infrastructure or the environment; or (iii) disruption of the life of a community (RSA, 2003:6). In the wake of social media, the world was exposed to the events almost live as people shared the footage of the events as they happened. In this section we look at what could have caused such extensive devastation. There are natural factors, political factors and Human factors which when put together led to this devastation.

According to Bell and Maud (1996), the greater Durban region is, in part, underlain by shale and other impermeable lithologies, many areas are naturally susceptible to landslides and mud flows and are thus unsuitable for large-scale development (Bell & Maud, 1996). It is for this reason that the flooding in this area caused Grab and Nash (2023) to investigate the chronology of the Durban floods for a period from 1836 to 2022. They report that ‘Approximately 67 significant floods impacted the greater Durban region during the period 1900–2022 (av. 0.54 per annum), but this almost doubles in frequency to 0.95 per annum since 1980’ (Grab & Nash, 2023:12). By all indications, this suggest that the Durban area is not only susceptible to flooding but the mudslides and sedimentation of 2022 is characteristic of flooding in the area. Viljoen and Booysen (2006) agree with the assertions of the above authors: ‘On average floods causing significant damage occur once every two years somewhere in the country, with larger and more extensive floods once every 10–15 years’ (Viljoen & Booysen, 2006:S83).

Durban is a colonial city which was designed not to accommodate as many people with the city limits. A number of township settlements then were developed through the Apartheid settlement system within a fifty-kilometre radius of the city. The dawn of democracy meant that more people who were initially not allowed to live within the city’s perimeters suddenly were able to move in and unfortunately settled in areas that were not ideal for habitation. To this very end, Viljoen and Booysen (2006) continues: ‘Large-scale urbanisation and population increases have contributed (and still are doing so) to large numbers of people, especially the poor, settling and living in floodplains in and around urban areas’ (Viljoen & Booysen, 2006:S85). The human factors that contributed to the devastation would then be accounted for on secondary natural disasters, such as extensive mudflows and landslides, alongside channel changes, sedimentation and soil erosion. The great urbanisation of Durban not only in the flood planes’ but even with the suburban developments of residential estates and other high concentration dwellings. This all meant water could not be absorbed and the channels were narrowed therefore the intensity and breaking of riverbanks directly hit dwellings. The floods therefore affected both the rich areas and was devastating among the poor who had no other alternatives, and their structures were of even lesser quality materials. It also transpired that the storm water drainages were obstructed by lack of maintenance.

Considering the above factors, one can deduce that the floods are a result of many factors but the reality that the climate change of the recent years will mean the frequency of the floods will continue to and is increasing. The effects are on all the residents but the impact always greater on the poorer communities who are forced to make dwellings on slopy unstable floodplains and water channels susceptible to landslides and mudflows. Grab and Nash (2023) assert that ‘this rain fell in a region: (i) that has become extensively built-up, with large surface areas impenetrable to water (e.g. roads); (ii) where ponding of water occurred behind infrastructural developments; and (iii) where blockage of human-engineered drainage systems was common’ (Grab & Nash, 2023:17). They then go on to say that these flooding events and the human-induced contributions have been impacting Durban and surrounding areas since



the mid-nineteenth century. The State and non-governmental organisations will need to work together on a broader plan which includes not just relief after the fact but pro-active initiatives which will alleviate the impact of these floods. The number of these initiatives is too broad for the scope of this article but it involves town-planning and water channelling measures, Human settlement re-alignment for both the affluent and poorer communities and importantly a more focused and functional municipal management.

### **Ecotheology and Climate Change**

The post-colonial and post-covid context are typified amongst other challenges by uncertainty, economic instability, structural inequalities, poverty, unemployment, political instability, wars and other factors like continuing loss of life by the so-called 'natural disasters'. Just after covid-19 proudly took many loved people away from us, flood squeezed itself to erode out the lives of people in Kwazulu Natal, Mozambique, Malawi, Cameroon and other African countries. The Wikipedia (2023) records shows that floods formed by various causes killed 1,216 people in Malawi, 476 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,<sup>[1]</sup> 198 in Mozambique, 135 in Rwanda, 42 in Somalia, 40 in Madagascar, 29 in Ethiopia, 18 in Uganda, 16 in Kenya, 15 in South Africa and another in Cameroon.

Besides trying to hide our heads into the sand, it cannot be doubted that the lack of African leadership is not innocent in many of these issues. The political will of those in power has forgotten or even ignored the call to return to the ubuntu spirit and well as communal life which became an African weapon to ensure that poverty, inequality, and other related factors are minimized and even eradicated from the society. As long the direction of the political will of most of the leadership is focussed on continued corruption, self-enrichment and greed, the African continent in particular, remains far from the liberation that the liberation movements used as slogans and manifestos to get into power. If my argument above is to be falsified, the experience we should start having is the end of the widening gap between the poor and the rich. The spirit of individualism which has replaced African communal life should also be decentralised, which will ensure that Christian leadership is managing to respond to Cain's question in a more African way when he asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis, 4:9). The author is of the opinion that it remains our theological and moral obligation to ensure that the lives of those around us are preserved and protected.

There seems to be a growing number of examples that underscore the sad reality that moral decay is at the heart of public human engagement, in contrast to the so-called African Ubuntu Principles. This forgotten subject (Ubuntu) can be evidenced by the increasing number of lives lost from ignorance and the love of wealth. The long-time continuing *Life Isidimeni* Inquest can be an example of this, where other people made business out of innocent lives (Monama, 2022). The recent issue of one life being burnt as an exchange of one's freedom in Thabo Bester's case is another relevant case that demonstrate that Africans have stopped valuing life as they used to before. The moral respect of life cannot easily be restored by the use of western justice system, but there is a need of African justice system to be restored. Former president Zuma once argued that a western justice is not the only justice we can use, but we also need African ways of resolving differences and dissatisfaction in bringing the respect of life into humanity. He was quoted saying: "Let us solve African problems the African way, not the white man's way" (Williams, 2012). This he was saying after realising that the traditional African leadership that used to deal with challenges in protection of its people had faded away and people are now only resorting to courts to solve their differences.

It is believed that Cholera has visited our country out of ignorance. If the issue of unclean water which for many years since the inception of the democracy has been raised through many service delivery protest it becomes easy to accept that the current situation is a result





of ignorance from those with power to ensure that the drinking water is clean. One reporter said: “As deaths from cholera this week rose to 15 in Gauteng, South Africa’s most populous province, many residents are blaming the government for a lack of clean water for drinking and other household uses (Al Jazeera, 2023:1).” There is no denial to this truth since our history shows that nothing had been done with this very old problem which talks to one of the essential needs for life. Honourable Minister, David Mahlobo confirmed that this is indeed an old problem for a number of years (Al Jazeera News, 2023:1). People in low lying areas had been warned many times to evacuate those places, but as much as they do not have another land to move to, it remains the problem of the government to provide them with one. This directly talks to the reasons why the issue of land redistribution for the author becomes not only relevant, but most important one (Baloyi, 2023).

The arrival of Covid also exposed lack of leadership in the sense that even the educational system in this country, has not done much to evade the inequalities that existed even before the dawn of democracy. Whether thick or thin, the line between the schools for the poor township parents from those of the rich parents was clearly visible, adding to the fact that not much has changed from almost three decades of democracy within educational sector. The controversies that surrounded the reopening of the schools during the covid-19 exposed and demonstrated the dearth of leadership, particularly African leadership since the people leading the government are Africans. The report by Macupe (2021) indicated how the confusing decisions from the department of education and their unions were adding more stress to the vulnerable teachers and school children. Even the World Health Organization (WHO) find their advises being back and forth while the political opportunism were stealing from the poor in the name of tenders There were a lot of confusion from leaders of government and unions (Baloyi,2021; Ndaba, 2020; Mabena, 2020). The church leadership was also nowhere to be found during the time when the poor and the marginalized were vulnerable and decisions were being made without caring about their livelihoods. From both the church and the government, leadership was ignorant to address shark dwellers whose families were expected to quarantine and isolate while more than two people were sharing one shark without toilets and water. That was the same time a child from poor background whose schools did not have any water or facilities that could enable them to distance and prevent the spread of Covid-19 were being forced to return to schools. While some schools had good running water to wash hands, other schools were not having any water, hence curbing the spread of the covid would be difficult if not impossible, hence the Kayelitsha community cramped and close their civic centre protesting “Washing hands- with what (Nombembe, 2020).” On the other hand more pressure and threats were being exerted on poor teachers who were told “no work no pay” during such a vulnerable situation while unions, church and other forms of leadership became quite to defend for them (Koko, 2020, Mahamba, 2020). This was done while many of them were still wondering how to return to work with their risky situation of having chronic sicknesses. Prophetic voice is missing to address issues of continued corruption, abuse of power and lack of basic service delivery which is also standing on the way of reconciliation. The continued inequality, corruption, greed and all forms of injustices demands theology of stewardship to stand up and be the voice of the defenceless. The dividing inequalities are very evident and the only way to reconcile the divided nation as a way forward demands that truth, peace and justice meet somewhere (Lederach, 1999).

### **Renewed Church Mission on Climate Change**

The theology of mission that addresses environmental issues has recently been an important item of Christian missions. That is why Geisler (1980) contends that ‘some ecological ethics allege that Christianity is incompatible with stress on man’s natural environment’ (Geisler, 1980:250). Coetzee et al., (2023) referring to evangelism, call for a theology that needs to be rediscovered in order to “enable believers to become involve in the world in a new way” (Coetzee et al., 2023:2). The same is required with regards to the theology of environmental



mission, which is called the new category within the mission work of the church (Lausanne movement 2016). A theology of creation is therefore required to be included the mission of the church. A call is also made to churches to reconsider the promotion of environmental mission. This is important and necessary because disasters bring into sharp focus, the relationship between the creator God, his creation, and human beings. Churches are therefore urged to include this new category of mission as part of their evangelistic project.

Environmental ills such as biodiversity loss, deforestation, floods, soil erosion, the acidification of the oceans, the pollution of the atmosphere, the climatic change, and the resultant human suffering can no longer be ignored. Sonoda (2023) contends; 'climate change poses a challenges to water resources' (Sonoda, 2023:3). Houghton (2016) adds that on average, floods and droughts are the most damaging of the world's disasters. He further indicates that between 1975 and 2002, due to flooding from rainfall over 200,000 lives were lost and 2.2 billion affected, and due to drought over half a million lives were lost and 1.3 billion affected. In this instance, tropical cyclones are singled out as 'one of the most important high-impact weather events in terms of loss of life and damage'. As recent as 1970, the Bhola cyclone killed more than 300 000 people in Bangladesh" (Jianping et al., 2016:133).

Biblical foundation for creation stewardship is indicated by Wright in (Lausanne Movement 2016) who suggested that the Bible as a whole portrays the relationship between God, humanity, and the rest of creation as something like a triangle of relationships—with God, us, and non-human creation at each corner of the triangle. The *Mission Dei* as seen in the Great Commission; 'make disciples of all nations', 'teaching them to obey' everything that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19–20) also touches on the care for creation. We cannot make disciples, teach them to obey commands and ignore their environment. Craig Sorley in (Lausanne Movement 2026) is therefore on point that "Jesus did not command that we go out and make mere converts. He called us to make disciples whose lives would change the world. Discipleship transforms people, communities, and entire nations—and, in a world that changes over time, that discipleship will need to be applied in fresh new ways to new circumstances". The insistence of the story of Genesis upon domination of nature does not promote destruction of creation but care and preservation of it as 'good' the way God wanted it to be. Geisler (1980) is therefore correct when he contends that 'not only is the material world called essentially good but it is also said to reflect the glory of God' (Geisler 1980:251). He also adds that the observant eye can see the evidence of God on all creation. Having Ps 139:7-12 in mind, he also states: 'God is everywhere manifest; He is in the darkness, on the land and in the sea, in the height and in the deep' (ibid.).

Prophetic environmental mission is thus the responsibility the whole church not only the selected few. Bosch (2011) reasons that it is not a monopoly of the ordained but a ministry of the ordained and non-ordained (Bosch, 2011:467). It is the responsibility of the church as part of her mission to spread the theology of environmental responsibility around the world and to make the masses aware of the reality of climate change and its effects which are leading to countless catastrophes. Humanity's love for God, neighbour and creation should stand up as enough reasons to preserve and look after the environment, to ensure that it is as good as God wanted it to be when He created it. Violence against the environment is thus viewed as sin. Churches are therefore urged to employ the gifts (technology, science, knowledge and wisdom) which God gave us in order to protect and not to destroy the environment.

### **Front-line Communities and Climate Change**

Within the framework of responsible public theology, critical solidarity, compassion, and prophetic witness are important categories. Cochrane (2011) notes that public theology is critical solidarity from a biblical and theological perspective and is always located with those who suffer (Cochrane, 2011:50). Correspondingly, Koopman (2012) argues that public



theology is prophetic theology that is motivated by compassion for the marginalized and the vulnerable (Koopman, 2012:1). Responsible public theology acknowledges that climate justice is a shared responsibility to safeguard the rights and dignity of those disproportionately affected by climate change which occurs as a direct result of humanity's actions and inactions in the world (Olofinjana, 2022:1). In its critical examination of issues that contribute to climate change, public theology advocates ethical decision-making that is mindful of the impact of bad policies and exploitative acts, especially when that impacts the health and well-being of the poor in societies. It starts with the question: What behaviours and policies contribute to climate change?. With this in mind, it can be argued that public theology takes seriously the moral dimension that leads to societal challenges. To this end, the next section recalls the effects of climate change which befell the frontline communities during the 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal. Consequently, environmental stewardship is required in policies aimed at mitigating the impact of climate change on poor communities.

The 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal are a stark warning that frontline communities are at increasing risk of devastation and death if proper collaborative efforts and governmental planning and policies do not take seriously the issue of climate change. A responsible public theology response to the effects of climate change and more specifically, the recent flooding in KwaZulu-Natal calls for empathy, compassion, and practical support. This requires joint action by various local social sectors and international interest groups. In South Africa, patterns of human settlement still occur largely according to race and economic status. People living in impoverished areas are susceptible to a myriad of social woes such as unemployment, poor sanitation, lack of decent housing, lack of security and poor electricity and water supply. Moreover, appalling infrastructure renders frontline communities vulnerable to incidents of accidental fires, and extreme weather conditions such as heavy rains and flooding. This is precisely the situation of frontline communities who have been ravaged by incessant flooding in KwaZulu-Natal in 2022.

Climate change related floods have over the years become a devastating phenomenon particularly in the global south because of high population densities, poor solid waste management, settlements of people in flood susceptible areas and lack of or degrading infrastructure. Due to the legacy of apartheid, the most vulnerable communities in KwaZulu-Natal are Black, living in low-lying informal settlements characterised by shacks and squatter camps. Naicker and Molobi (2022) argue that structural and systemic oppression of Black people is a post-apartheid reality (Naicker & Molobi, 2022:3). Furthermore, that the systemic exclusion of Black people regarding employment, housing, education, service delivery, and a host of other factors intersect with race, class, gender, and geographic location to produce multiple layers of disadvantage, oppression, and suffering. Urban migration also has a profound effect on those most vulnerable to climate change and by 2020 it had been estimated that over 3200 such settlements exist as people flock to urban areas in search of employment opportunities and a better future (Membele, Naidu & Mutanga, 2022).

The socioeconomic injustices that render frontline communities vulnerable to disaster and destruction during periods of heavy rain and climate change must be addressed in a holistic and collaborative manner and social justice and equitable distribution of resources must be advocated for. The response of public theology in this regard is to be a prophetic voice which calls attention to structural and systemic injustices by challenging unjust policies and practices and advocating for equal distribution of resources. Government, NGOs, FBOs, community leaders and experts in various fields must collaborate and strategize regarding sustainable development and disaster preparedness. Mathole (2015) elucidates that the lingering legacy of apartheid is evident in South Africa's social engineering (Mathole, 2015:126). From the perspective of public theology, emergency relief and a clarion call for the rights of frontline communities as well as working towards sustainable long-term solutions must be engaged as a matter of urgency. In this context, we argue that the effects of climate change and the



devastation and destruction it wreaked in the 2022 floodings in KwaZulu-Natal is not only because of natural disaster but is also the effects of political and economic disenfranchisement and marginalization.

Responsible Public theology calls for the biblical concept of stewardship to be incorporated into the teachings of the Church where adherents are inspired to be good stewards of God's earth and to adopt sustainable practices in their daily lives (Genesis 2:15). The Church and theological engagement must influence and advocate for government, NGO's FBO's and all other stakeholders to engage in conversations, dialogues and debates that raise awareness about climate change and its impending dangers. The Church and theological engagement must lead the way in reducing its carbon footprint and advocating for energy efficient methods of heating and cooling buildings through improving insulation, adopting eco-friendly technologies, and using renewable energy sources. The Church and theological engagement must be a key player in promoting ecologically sensible habits and behaviours. Reducing waste and encouraging sustainable lifestyles must be important points of discussion and the promotion of ethical and sustainable consumption must be advocated for (Diara & Christian, 2013:90). Climate change must be viewed as a moral issue and one of the most important challenges facing humanity. As a Christian mandate, the Church must take seriously its biblical imperative to demonstrate a special concern for the poor and those who suffer disproportionately. The Church and theological engagement, given its unique position of prominence in most South African societies, can encourage cooperation and together with various stakeholders and communities, can and must advocate for an adoption of an ethic of environmental care. Balanced with poverty alleviation interventions, employment creation, and advocating for equity among all people, the Church can become the mechanism of accountability regarding environmental ethics and care. Through involvement in public education programs and advocacy, the Church can and must work towards eliminating the risk of climate change particularly as it affects the most vulnerable among us. Clearly, long-term commitment from religious communities, churches and the public is needed to ensure effective action to mitigate the effects of climate change. In so doing, the Church, through public theology, will contribute holistically to the prioritization of sustainable practices and shaping future generations for addressing climate change in an equitable and sustainable way (Diara & Christian, 2013).

## Conclusion

Climate change is devastating to human communities, but it is even more devastating to the poor and powerless, especially in the absence of responsible political leadership. This was illustrated by the catastrophic floods in April 2022 that devastated South Africa's KwaZulu Natal (KZN) province, shaking not only the country but also the international community. The KZN devastation conjured up images of the Genesis floods in the minds of most believers, certainly not associating the biblical narrative with climate change, but rather because of the great loss of life without salvation, or the Ark of Salvation so to speak. To that end, this paper considered the realities of climate change in relation to religious teachings, particularly realities that require responsible public theology in the realm of Christianity. Consequently, this article called for responsible public theology on the reality of climate change and its impact on the plight of frontline communities, as witnessed during the KZN flood disaster that left thousands with no hope of salvation and perished as a result.

## References

Al Jazeera News. (2023). *South Africans blame gov't as cholera outbreak kills 15*. Al Jazeera Blog posted on 24 May 2023 and accessed on 07 June 2023.



Ayeb-Karlsson, S., Kniveton, D., Cannon, T., Van Der Geest, K., Ahmed, I., Derrington, E.M., Florano, E. & Opondo, D.O. (2019). I will not go, I cannot go: cultural and social limitations of disaster preparedness in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. *Disasters*, 43(4), 752-770.

Baloyi ME. (2023). Land redistribution A Thorny Issue towards Reconciliation in a Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Practical Theological Perspective. In *Ecotheology, Sustainability and Religions of the World*. Intechopen edited by Levente Hufnagel, IntechOpen, London.

Baloyi, ME. (2021). The paradox of the reopening of schools under lockdown- An exposure of the continued inequalities within the South African educational sector: A theological decolonial view. *HTS Theological Studies*, 77(4), 1-10.

Bell, F. & Maud, R. (1996). Examples of landslides associated with the Natal Group and Pietermaritzburg formation in the greater Durban area of Natal, South Africa. *Bulletin of Engineering Geology & the Environment*, 53(1).

Bosch, D.J. (2011). *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (No. 16). New York: Orbis books.

Cochrane, J. (2011). Against the Grain: Responsible Public Theology in a Global Era. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5(1), 44–62.

Coetzee, F.R., Nel, M. & Knoetze, J.J. (2023). Evangelism as an invitation to missional discipleship in the kingdom of God. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 44(1), 2708.

Cox, J., Finau, G., Kant, R., Tarai, J. & Titifanue, J. (2018). Disaster, Divine Judgment, and Original Sin. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 30(2), 380-411.

Davidson, R.M. (2004). The Genesis flood narrative: Crucial issues in the current debate. *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 1(1), 49-77.

Diara, B. & Christian, N. (2013). Theology of Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation: The Place of the Church. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(13), 85-91.

Ergül, H., Gökalp, E. & Cangöz, I. (2010). From the wrath of Allah to divine judgment: natural disasters in the Islamist press in Turkey. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 5(1), 1-20.

eThekwini (MCES), Municipality Community and Emergency Services. (2022). Report to the Finance, Security & Emergency Services Committee; April 2022 Floods Disaster. Durban, p. 12.

Geisler, N. L. (1980). *Ethics: alternatives and issues*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House.

Grab, SW. & Nash, D. (2023). A new flood chronology for KwaZulu-Natal (1836-2022): The April 2022 Durban floods in historical context', *South African Geographical Journal*, 1(1), 1–22.

Haluza-DeLay, R. (2014). Religion and climate change: varieties in viewpoints and practices. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 5(2), 261-279.

Hayes, B.C. & Marangudakis, M. (2000). Religion and environmental issues within Anglo-American democracies. *Review of religious research*, 1(1), 159-174.

Hirono, T. & Blake, M.E. (2017). The role of religious leaders in the restoration of hope following natural disasters. *Sage open*, 7(2), 1-15.



Ibita, M.M.S. (2020). The Great Flood in Genesis 6–9: An Ecological Reading of the J and P Traditions. *Biblical theology bulletin*, 50(2), 68-76.

Jenkins, W., Berry, E. & Kreider, L.B. (2018). Religion and climate change. *Annual review of environment and resources*, 43(1), 85-108.

Jianping Li et al., (2016). Dynamics and Predictability of Large-Scale, High-Impact Weather and Climate Events. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Special Publications of the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics). Available at: <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.uplib.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1159351&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 10 June 2023).

Joshua, U. & Bekun, F.V. (2020). The path to achieving environmental sustainability in South Africa: the role of coal consumption, economic expansion, pollutant emission, and total natural resources rent. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 27(9), 9435–9443.

Kanagy, C.L. and Nelsen, H.M. (1995). Religion and environmental concern: Challenging the dominant assumptions. *Review of religious research*, 1(1). 33-45.

Koko, K. (2020). *No work no pay, threatens principal*. The Star, 09 July 2020, p1.

Koopman, N. (2012). Public Theology in pluralistic societies? Lessons from the theology of Etienne de Villiers. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(2), 1-6.

Lausanne Movement, Bell, C. and White, R.S., (2016) *Creation Care and the Gospel: Reconsidering the Mission of the Church*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Academic (Lausanne Library). Available at: <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.uplib.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2153468&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 8 June 2023).

Lederack, JP. (1999). *Journey Towards Reconciliation*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

Lee, O., 1999. Science knowledge, world views, and information sources in social and cultural contexts: Making sense after a natural disaster. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(2).187-219.

Mabena, S. (2020). *Angie's big backtrack*. The citizen, 06 July 2020, p3.

Macupe, B. (2021). *Basic Education Department must not send conflicting messages*. Mail and Guardian, 31 January 2021, p2.

Mahamba, C. (2020). *Two teachers test Covid-19 positive*. The Star 11 June 2020, p2.

Mathole, E. (2015). *A movement seeking to mediate and unlock the richness of God's manifold blessings, especially but not only amongst the urban poor*, in E. Conradie & M. Pillay (eds.), *Ecclesial reform and deform movements in the South African context*, pp. 117–130, Sun Media, Stellenbosch.

Membele, G., Naidu, M., and Mutanga, O. (2022). *Local knowledge adds value to mapping flood risk in South Africa's informal settlements*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/local-knowledge-adds-value-to-mapping-flood-risk-in-south-africas-informal-settlements-181304>.



Monama, T. (2022). *Life Isidimeni inquest: Forceful Qedani Mahlangu told us mental health patients have to be moved*. News24 blog posted on 19 October 2022 and accessed on 08 June 2023 at [www.news24.com](http://www.news24.com)

Naicker, Linda, and Victor Molobi. (2022). A Socially-Engaged Theological Response to the Historic and Structural Nature of Food Insecurity in South Africa. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 48 (1). 1-17.

Nasr, S. (1967). *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, Chicago: Kazi Publishers

Nche, G.C. (2020). The Church Climate Action: Identifying the Barriers and the Bridges, *Transformation*, 37(3). 222–241.

Ndaba, B (2020). *Pressure is mounting on Angie*, DFA News, blog posted on 21 July 2020 and accessed on 22 July 2020 at [www.dfa.co.za](http://www.dfa.co.za)

Nombembe, P. (2020). *Wash your hands-with what. Cape Town shark dwellers protest over water a day before lockdown*. Timeslive blog posted on 25 March 2020 and accessed on 08 June 2023 at [www.timeslive.org](http://www.timeslive.org)

Ntseh, B.A. (2012). Human complicity in flood occurrence: An African biblical hermeneutical reading of Genesis 6: 5-8: 22. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 2(2). 91-102.

Olofinjana, I. (2022). Sustainability, African Identity and Climate Justice: Reframing the Climate Conversation. *Anvil Journal of Theology and Mission*. <https://churchmissionsociety.org/anvil/sustainability-african-identity-and-climate-justice-israel-olofinjana-anvil-vol-38-issue-2/>.

Pearson, C. (2010). The purpose and practice of a public theology in a time of climate change. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4(3). 356-372.

Phiri, D., Simwanda, M. and Nyirenda, V. (2021). Mapping the impacts of cyclone Idai in Mozambique using Sentinel-2 and OBIA approach. *South African Geographical Journal*, 103(2). 237-258.

Ray, D.K., West, P.C., Clark, M., Gerber, J.S., Prishchepov, A.V. & Chatterjee, S. (2019). Climate change has likely already affected global food production. *PLOS ONE*, 14(5), e0217148.

RSA., 2003. *Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 | South African Government*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.za/documents/disaster-management-act>.

Sonoda, J. (2013) *National Water Program Strategy for Responding to Climate Change*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc (Climate Change and Its Causes, Effects and Predictions). Available at: <https://search.ebscohost-com.uplib.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=667770&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 10 June 2023).

Viljoen, M.F. and Booyesen, H.J. (2006) Planning and management of flood damage control: The South African experience. *Irrigation and Drainage: the ICID journal*, 55(S1). S83–S91.

Wilson, S.M. (2017). Blood vengeance and the imago Dei in the flood narrative (Genesis 9: 6). *Interpretation*, 71(3). 263-273.



Zheng, X., Streimikiene, D., Balezentis, T., Mardani, A., Cavallaro, F. & Liao, H. (2019). A review of greenhouse gas emission profiles, dynamics, and climate change mitigation efforts across the key climate change players', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 234(1). 1113–1133.

Ziervogel, G., New, M., Archer van Garderen, E., Midgley, G., Taylor, A., Hamann, R., Stuart-Hill, S., Myers, J. & Warburton, M. (2014). Climate change impacts and adaptation in South Africa', *WIREs Climate Change*, 5(5). 605–620.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



**This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence**

*The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.*