

## ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN CHUKA IGAMBANG'OMBE SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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## Abstract

This study sought to investigate the role of the Catholic Church in addressing the environmental crisis in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County. The research was carried out in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. A population of 15574 Church members comprising 20 priests, 20 Development officials, 3663 youths, 4285 CMA, and 7321 CWA was targeted by the survey. A sample of 10 priests, 10 Development committee members, 86 youths, 175 CWA, and 98 CMA members was obtained for the study, making a total of 389 members of the targeted population. Data was obtained using interviews and questionnaires. The study established that the Church contributed to environmental conservation by educating members on tree planting, promoting environmental conservation among Christians, safeguarding water catchment areas, discouraging tree cutting, organising garbage collection, raising public awareness, participating in volunteer clean-up activities, preventing tree cutting, soil erosion and advocating for preservation services. Considering the findings obtained, the study recommends collaboration between the Catholic Church, local stakeholders, government agencies and environmental groups to enhance conservation efforts, boost community involvement, strengthen advocacy within the Church on environmental conservation, adopt sustainable land management practices, enforce deforestation regulations and improve waste management to curb water pollution and ecological degradation.

**Key terms:** Catholic Church, collaboration and advocacy, community participation, environmental conservation, environmental crisis.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation presents a growing crisis that threatens ecosystems and human well-being worldwide. In Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, Kenya, this issue is compounded by deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable land use practices. The Catholic Church, as a key social and moral institution, has a significant role in advocating for environmental conservation within the community. Despite numerous environmental conservation activities, such as tree planting, garbage collection, public awareness campaigns, and advocacy for sustainable practices, environmental challenges persist in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County. The Catholic Church's involvement, while notable, faces limitations due to insufficient collaboration with local stakeholders, inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations, and limited community engagement. Addressing these gaps requires a deeper understanding of the Church's role and the effectiveness of its strategies in promoting environmental conservation.

The Catholic Church refers to the Roman Catholic Church, a major Christian denomination with a presence in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, involved in various social and environmental activities. Collaboration and advocacy involve the Church's efforts to work alongside other organisations, stakeholders, and the government to promote environmental conservation and advocate for sustainable practices. Community participation refers to the involvement of Church members and the wider community in environmental activities such as cleanups, tree planting, and public education. Environmental conservation is the protection, preservation, and sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems, a key focus of the Church's initiatives. An environmental crisis describes situations where natural ecosystems and resources are severely threatened by human activities, leading to degradation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity.

This paper will provide an overview of how the Catholic Church contributes to environmental conservation efforts in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County. It will explore the Church's strategies, challenges faced, and opportunities for enhancing its impact through greater collaboration with local stakeholders, improved advocacy, and sustainable environmental practices. The study aims to underscore the importance of religious institutions in addressing environmental crises and fostering sustainable development at the community level.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review comprehensively explores the critical role of the Catholic Church in addressing environmental crises by integrating various scholarly works and research findings. Mugambi and Vähäkangas (2001) provide essential insights into the theological perspective on the Church's responsibility in environmental stewardship. Their work emphasises the potential for Christian principles to significantly mitigate environmental challenges by fostering a sense of moral obligation among believers. They argue that the Church's moral authority can influence individual and collective action toward sustainable practices.

Gitau (2000) underscores the Church's role as a potent force for change in environmental conservation. He highlights the influence of religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, on shaping environmental policies and practices. Gitau's work specifically points to how the Church's vast network and grassroots

presence can mobilise communities to participate in conservation activities and advocate for better environmental governance.

Johnson (2016) emphasises the importance of the Church in imparting the moral imperative of environmental stewardship among its followers. He argues that the Church must adapt to contemporary ecological challenges by integrating environmental concerns into its teachings and activities. Johnson's contribution is particularly notable for linking the Church's moral teachings with practical actions, suggesting that the Church can serve as a catalyst for ecological transformation by addressing both spiritual and environmental needs.

Berry (2000) and Taylor (2019) highlight the Church's duty towards creation and its responsibility to protect the environment as a divine gift necessary for the peaceful coexistence of humanity. Berry focuses on the theological foundations for environmental care, while Taylor expands on the practical aspects of this duty, emphasising how Church-led initiatives can create a ripple effect of positive environmental practices within communities.

The literature also discusses the challenges and limitations faced by the Church in advocating for environmental conservation. Benedict XVI (2005) and the United States Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2019) emphasise the significance of aligning environmental conservation efforts with Catholic teachings and social responsibility. Their contributions highlight the need for the Church to navigate resistance from influential individuals and groups with vested interests in environmental exploitation. They advocate for stronger Church positions and actions that align with doctrinal teachings on the care of creation. To explore the nuanced understanding of the Church's role at the local level, Bauckham (2010) and Pope Francis (2015) provide moral and ethical frameworks for addressing environmental challenges within the Catholic tradition. Bauckham's work centres on interpreting biblical texts to support environmental stewardship, while Pope Francis in "Laudato Si'" presents an encyclical that calls for an integral ecology, addressing not only environmental degradation but also social justice issues. These works offer valuable frameworks for understanding how local churches can integrate ecological consciousness into their pastoral and community work.

Overall, this literature review provides a thorough account of the Catholic Church's involvement in addressing environmental crises. It shows that while the Church has a strong moral and theological foundation for environmental stewardship, its practical impact is often challenged by social, economic, and political factors. The reviewed literature informs this research by highlighting the need for more robust Church-led advocacy, enhanced collaboration with local stakeholders, and greater integration of environmental education within the Church's teachings. By synthesising these diverse perspectives, the review underscores the importance of understanding both the limitations and opportunities of the Church's engagement in environmental conservation, particularly in the local context of Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research utilised a descriptive survey research design to examine the role of the Catholic Church in addressing environmental degradation in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, Kenya. This approach was chosen for its capability to gather and assess both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive view of the Church's environmental efforts. The research was conducted in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, focusing on 10 Catholic parishes actively engaged in environmental conservation. Environmental issues such as droughts, decreasing river water levels, and unsustainable agricultural practices notably affect the area. The target population comprised 15,574 Church members, including priests, development officials, and leaders from the Catholic Women's Association (CWA), Catholic Men's Association (CMA), and Youth Association (YA). A sample size of 389 was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, with stratified random sampling employed to ensure representative coverage across different groups. Data were gathered using structured questionnaires and oral interviews. The questionnaires contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions to elicit detailed and specific responses. Oral interviews were conducted with priests to gain in-depth insights into the Church's conservation activities. The analysis of data was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. The analysis involved coding, classifying, and organising the data, followed by statistical evaluation using tables, pie charts, and percentages to present the findings clearly.

### 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Role of the Catholic Church in addressing the environmental crisis in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County**

Table 1 shows data that provides insights into the contributions of the Catholic Church to environmental conservation efforts. The frequencies and percentages associated with each activity provide light on the various initiatives undertaken by the Church to promote environmental awareness and sustainable practices.

**Table 1: Contribution of Catholics in Conserving Environment**

|  | Frequency | Per cent |
|--|-----------|----------|
| Educating Members on Planting Trees              | 149       | 41.5     |
| Active Planting of Trees                         | 58        | 16.1     |
| Encourage Christians to Conserve the Environment | 86        | 24.0     |
| Protecting Water Catchment Areas                 | 24        | 6.7      |
| Environment Conservations                        | 24        | 6.7      |
| Discouraging Cutting Down of Trees               | 18        | 5.0      |
| Total  | 359       | 100.0    |

#### **Educating Members on Planting Trees**

Educating members on planting trees within the Catholic community is a proactive initiative aligned with Pope Francis's integral ecology paradigm, which emphasises the interconnectedness of environmental, social and economic issues. According to Deane-Drummond (2023), Pope Francis's theological and ethical framework underscores the moral imperative for environmental stewardship, rooted in Catholic teachings

on care for creation. Educating members about tree planting serves as a practical application of integral ecology, fostering a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life and promoting responsible environmental actions among believers (Deane-Drummond, 2023). Research indicated that 149(41.5%) of the respondents indicated that educating members on planting trees signifies a significant focus on imparting knowledge and fostering awareness within the Catholic community. This work aligns with the expertise of Deane-Drummond (2022) in ecological theology, emphasising the role of education in shaping the environmental consciousness of religious communities, potentially affecting sustainable practices.

## **Active Planting of Trees**

Engaging in the active planting of trees is a proactive environmental strategy that contributes to ecological restoration and resilience from a social-ecological perspective (Krievins et al., 2018). This approach aligns with principles of ecological stewardship, emphasising tangible actions individuals can take to enhance biodiversity and ecosystem health. In this research, results showed that active planting of trees accounted for 58(16.2%) of the respondents, this represents a hands-on approach to environmental conservation within the Catholic Church. This alignment is supported by Orobator's (2019) insights into theology and ethics, providing perspectives on the theological foundations and ethical considerations guiding active involvement in tree-planting initiatives.

## **Encourage Christians to Conserve the Environment**

Encouraging Christians to conserve the environment reflects a broader appeal within the Catholic community to embrace a sustainable lifestyle (Osei-Owusu, 2019). This effort aligns with insights from environmental ethics and theology, emphasising the ethical dimensions of promoting individual participation in environmental conservation efforts. Findings of this research reported that encouraging Christians to conserve the environment was mentioned by 86(24.0%); this reflects a broader appeal to the Catholic community to embrace a sustainable lifestyle. This work aligns with insights from Osei-Owusu (2019), who focused on environmental ethics and theology, providing perspectives on the ethical dimensions of encouraging individuals to actively participate in environmental conservation efforts.

## **Protecting Water Catchment Areas and Environment Conservations**

Protecting water catchment areas and environmental conservation efforts signify the Catholic Church's commitment to safeguarding critical ecological zones (Okyere-Manu, 2022). This aligns with insights from environmental science and policy, emphasising the significance of these initiatives in preserving water resources and maintaining overall environmental health. Research indicated that 24(6.7%) of the respondents reported protecting water catchment areas and environment conservations, these highlight the Catholic Church's commitment to safeguarding critical ecological zones. This aligns with the expertise of Okyere-Manu (2022) in environmental science and policy, offering insights into the significance of these initiatives in preserving water resources and maintaining overall environmental health.

## **Discouraging Cutting Down of Trees**

Discouraging the cutting down of trees is a vital environmental initiative that underscores a commitment to sustainable land management and biodiversity preservation within the Catholic community (Vucetich et

al., 2021). This effort aligns with the integration of science and ethics in biodiversity conservation, emphasising the ethical imperative of preserving forests for climate regulation, wildlife habitat and overall ecosystem health. Discouraging the cutting down of trees was perceived by 18(5.0%) of respondents, this suggests that a small but notable percentage of respondents attribute a role to the Catholic community in advocating against the practice of cutting down trees. This data aligns with Odozor's (2022) works that focus on ethical and environmental issues within the Catholic Church.

## **Garbage Collection in Towns and Tree Planting**

Garbage collection in towns and tree planting are critical components of green infrastructure that contribute to sustainable urban development and resilience (Parker, 2023). Effective garbage collection practices in urban areas not only promote cleanliness and public health but also reduce environmental pollution. Simultaneously, tree-planting initiatives enhance urban green spaces, support biodiversity, and contribute to climate resilience within cities. Research showed that the Catholic Church actively engages in garbage collection and tree planting, demonstrating a commitment to environmental stewardship within the parish (Murungi, OI, 2023). These initiatives not only contribute to the immediate improvement of the local environment but also signify a proactive approach towards sustaining the ecological balance. Active participation in garbage collection contributes to a cleaner and healthier community and addresses waste management issues, which is essential for environmental hygiene and pollution control. Concurrently, the tree planting initiatives align with conservation efforts aimed at preserving and enhancing the local ecosystem (Mbirichi, OI, 2023).

## **Creating Public Awareness of Environmental Conservation**

Creating public awareness of environmental conservation is crucial for fostering widespread understanding and engagement in sustainable practices within communities (Pawar & Rothkar, 2015). Effective communication and education campaigns play a vital role in promoting environmental consciousness and encouraging behaviour change towards conservation efforts. By raising awareness about critical environmental issues such as forest conservation, these initiatives empower individuals to take meaningful actions to protect natural resources and biodiversity. Findings reported that the parish emphasises the importance of education and outreach in nurturing a culture of environmental responsibility within the community. Additionally, active participation in volunteer cleanup activities signifies a hands-on approach to environmental stewardship, fostering community engagement and demonstrating a tangible commitment to preserving the environment (George, OI, 2023).

## **Active Participation in Volunteer Cleanup Activities**

Active participation in volunteer clean-up activities plays a significant role in local waste management and environmental stewardship (Matsumoto, 2014). This hands-on engagement fosters community involvement and empowers individuals to take direct action in addressing environmental challenges. Volunteer clean-up activities contribute to cleaner and healthier environments while raising awareness about waste management practices and the importance of responsible disposal methods. According to Kallikatt (OI, 2023), active participation in volunteer cleanup activities demonstrates a hands-on approach to environmental stewardship within the parish. Referencing Psalm 65:9-13 as a fundamental Bible verse

used to raise awareness about environmental conservation practices establishes a solid scriptural foundation for their conservation efforts (Kallikatt, OI, 2023).

## **Active Elimination of Tree Cutting, Prevention of Soil Erosion and Campaigns Highlighting the Benefits of Conserving the Environment**

Active efforts in eliminating tree-cutting, preventing soil erosion and promoting the benefits of environmental conservation are essential for sustainable land management (Dotterweich, 2013). These initiatives contribute to preserving natural habitats, maintaining soil fertility and mitigating the impacts of human activities on the environment. Campaigns that highlight the benefits of conserving the environment raise awareness about the importance of these efforts and encourage community participation in environmental protection. It was found that these activities showcase a commitment to practical environmental stewardship within the community. By preventing tree-cutting, the parish plays a crucial role in forest preservation, which is essential for maintaining biodiversity and combating climate change. Soil erosion prevention measures preserve fertile land and prevent ecological degradation. Educational campaigns contribute to raising awareness and fostering a culture of environmental responsibility among community members (Munene OI, 2023).

## **Active Participation in Environmental Conservation, Particularly Through Tree-Planting Initiatives**

Active participation in environmental conservation, especially through tree-planting initiatives, is instrumental in restoring deforested areas and promoting sustainable land management practices (Ewane, 2024). This community-driven approach fosters engagement and ownership among local residents, empowering them to contribute to reforestation efforts and biodiversity conservation. Understanding community participation in tree planting and management is essential for developing effective strategies that align with local needs and priorities. According to (Nyarire, OI, 2023), research showed that the Catholic Church actively participate in environmental conservation, particularly through tree-planting initiatives. This participation reflects the parish's commitment to tangible actions that contribute to ecological sustainability and the preservation of natural resources. Tree planting initiatives play a significant role in combating deforestation, promoting biodiversity and mitigating climate change. Additionally, these activities contribute to the beautification of the environment and restoration of degraded ecosystems.

## **Advocating For Preservation Services, Specifically Focusing on Protecting Water Catchment Areas and Controlling Various Forms of Pollution**

Advocating for preservation services, particularly focusing on protecting water catchment areas and controlling pollution, is crucial for safeguarding vital water resources (Cook, 2017). This advocacy involves promoting policies and initiatives aimed at preserving water quality and quantity, addressing pollution sources and enhancing sustainable water management practices. Cook's work emphasises the importance of protecting and conserving water resources through comprehensive strategies that integrate environmental stewardship and policy interventions. In this study, advocating for preservation services, (Valiyaveeyttil OI, 2023) mentioned specifically focusing on protecting water catchment areas and controlling various forms of pollution. This demonstrates a proactive approach towards environmental conservation within the parish, reflecting a commitment to addressing localised environmental challenges,

promoting sustainability and safeguarding natural resources for future generations; Psalms 148 and Psalms 8:18-25 were cited as key Bible verses used to sensitise people on environmental conservation, linking their initiatives to biblical teachings.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study illustrate the significant contributions of the Catholic Church in addressing environmental crises within Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County, Kenya. Through a descriptive survey, the study revealed the diverse initiatives undertaken by the Church to promote environmental awareness and sustainable practices. The frequencies and percentages associated with each activity shed light on the Church's commitment to environmental stewardship. Educating members on planting trees was identified as a significant focus, indicating a commitment to imparting knowledge and fostering environmental awareness within the Catholic community. Active planting of trees and encouraging Christians to conserve the environment represent hands-on approaches and a broader appeal to embrace sustainable lifestyles. Additionally, protecting water catchment areas, discouraging tree cutting and engaging in activities like garbage collection and tree planting initiatives reflect the Church's commitment to safeguarding critical ecological zones and implementing practical conservation measures. The proactive approach of the Catholic Church, as evidenced by the data, demonstrates a tangible commitment to ecological sustainability and the preservation of natural resources. These initiatives not only contribute to the immediate improvement of the local environment but also signify a profound dedication to sustaining the ecological balance in Chuka Igambang'ombe Sub-County.

**Recommendations:** The Catholic Church should foster structured partnerships with local stakeholders, governmental bodies, and environmental organisations. This collaboration could include forming a dedicated environmental committee comprising representatives from each partner. Regular meetings should be scheduled to coordinate efforts, share resources, and align goals. Additionally, joint initiatives such as community cleanup drives, tree-planting events, and environmental workshops should be organised to maximise the impact of conservation activities. To enhance advocacy within the Church community, develop targeted awareness campaigns and educational programs that emphasise the link between human well-being and environmental health. Utilise various communication channels such as sermons, community events, and educational materials to disseminate information. Incorporate environmental topics into regular church activities and sermons to engage the congregation. Create and distribute informative brochures and host workshops that focus on practical conservation practices and their benefits. Implement sustainable land management practices within Church-run properties and promote these practices among community members. Advocate for stricter regulations on deforestation by working with local authorities to enforce these laws. Enhance waste management strategies by setting up recycling programs and waste reduction initiatives within Church facilities and the broader community. These steps will help prevent water pollution and mitigate ecological degradation.

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