

## ECOLOGY IN THE SEVENTH-DAU ADVENTIST CHURCH

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the ecological views of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) through a historical perspective from its early pioneers to the 21st century. The SDA church showed concern for the environment from the beginning, with an emphasis on vegetarian lifestyles, country/rural living, and human responsibility as stewards of God. The theological basis of environmental stewardship in the SDA church is based on the biblical concept of humanity's role as the image and likeness of God. This article covers the ecological views of the SDA church in times of climate crisis, where the SDA church officially voices concern and proposes theological views regarding human responsibility in addressing climate change. In conclusion, the SDA church upholds the principle of environmental stewardship as an integral part of their religious life and practice and plays an active role in safeguarding and maintaining God's creation.*

**Keywords:** SDA church, Ecology, Stewardship, Environment

### Introduction

Ludwig Feuerbach, in 1843 said that "Nature, the world, has no value, no interest in Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul."<sup>1</sup> Feuerbach criticized the attitude of Christianity that seems anthropocentric and does not care about the environment. Meanwhile, in 1967, criticism of Christianity was also conveyed by Lynn White, Jr. in his writings, when he called Christianity as "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."<sup>2</sup> For him, the ecological crisis that occurred was caused by the theology of Christianity that placed its main concern on humans and not on the environment. However, at a time when the theology and practice of Christianity were considered anthropocentric, the Seventh-day Adventist Church (GMAHK) was present in the middle of the 19th century, as Christianity that concerned with environmental issues.

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<sup>1</sup> John Reumann, *Creation and New Creation: The Past, Present, and Future of God's Creative Activity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 8. Mengutip Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 287. Anthropocentric is a term used to describe an exclusive view of humans, which considers humans as central and more important than animals or plants.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", *Science*, vol. 15 (1967), 1203-1207. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>, diakses tanggal 22 Oktober 2023; Lynn White argues that Christianity's dogmatic understanding of the relationship between humans and nature is the cause of the ecological crisis and environmental degradation, where the notion of the mandate to dominate is understood to destructively exploit nature.

Environmental concern has been the theology of the Adventist Church since its beginnings.<sup>3</sup> Adventists emphasize biblical principles in the care of the environment.<sup>4</sup> This church also places environmental care as a core belief as God's stewardship.<sup>5</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church sees ecology within the scope of environmental stewardship. That is why the issues raised in this article are: What is the ecological view of the Adventist Church pioneers regarding the environment? What is the theological/biblical basis of environmental stewardship according to the Adventist Church? What is the attitude of the Adventist Church today in addressing the ecological crisis?

Therefore, this paper aims to: (1) examine the ecological perspective of the Adventist Church, (2) examine the theological/biblical basis of the concept of environmental stewardship of the Adventist Church, (3) examine the attitude and role of the Adventist Church in facing ecological problems from the impact of human activities in the era of global warming.

### **The Seventh-Day Adventist Church on Ecology**

To understand the ecological views of the Adventist Church, it is necessary to trace the early thoughts of the pioneers of the Adventist Church regarding ecology.

#### **Ecological View in the Early Seventh-day Adventists**

The Adventist Church emerged before the Environmental Movement and the Conservation Movement. During the early Adventist movement, the writings of John Muir, John Burroughs, Synister Graham, and Aldo Leopold helped the Adventist movement to see the importance of protecting the environment and promoting the concept of good environmental stewardship.<sup>6</sup>

The pioneers of the Adventist Church lived in the era before the Second Industrial Revolution, whereas the environmental movement only began later in the era after the Second Industrial Revolution. This means that the Adventist Church's understanding of environmental conservation began before modern ideas and values about environmental care were promoted.

The Adventist Church emphasizes the need to achieve a balance between human welfare and the preservation of nature. In this context, a sustainable lifestyle that pays attention to ecological balance is considered a form of environmental stewardship. Since the beginning Adventists have promoted environmentally friendly lifestyles such as vegetarian

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<sup>3</sup> David F. Garner, "On Back Burner: Adventist and Environmentalism", Spectrum (2021). <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/back-burner-adventists-and-environmentalism>, diakses 22 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Merek, "Science and Religion: "Seventh-day Adventist and Care for the Environment", *Encyclopedia of Sevent-day Adventist* (2021). <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=FFQG>, diakses tanggal 22 November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> *Apa Yang Perlu Anda Ketahui Tentang... 28 Uraian Doktrin Dasar Alkitabiah*, (Bandung: Indonesia Publishing House, 2006), 312-313.

<sup>6</sup> David F. Garner, "On Back Burner: Adventist and Environmentalism", Spectrum (2021). <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/back-burner-adventists-and-environmentalism>, diakses 22 November 2023.

diets, living in the countryside, avoiding consumerism, living economically, and staying away from materialism.<sup>7</sup> This can be seen in the writings of the early Adventist Church leaders.

**Concern for Animal Life with a Vegetarian lifestyle.** Concern for animals is one of the Adventist movement's arguments in favor of a vegetarian lifestyle. Joshep Bates was the first to introduce vegetarianism into the Adventist Church when he became a vegetarian in 1843. Joshep Bates, Ellen White and other pioneers were greatly influenced by the writings and dietary teachings of Synister Gates, who emphasized that the motivation for vegetarianism was not just a matter of health, but a matter of concern for animal life.<sup>8</sup> In 1865, H.C Jackson, an Adventist physician, wrote,

"It is quite bad enough to eat meats at all, however favorable the conditions of health in which animals are placed while living; but to take an ox, sheep, or swine, and shut him up in a dark place, ill-ventilated, and where exercise is impossible, and thus keep him for months, in order to fit him to be eaten by man, is so thoroughly monstrous to one's moral sense as to admit of no justification whatever."<sup>9</sup>

A year later, in 1868, Ellen White also highlighted the treatment of animals, where in her letter, she advised that:

"Children, be kind to dumb animals. Never cause them pain unnecessarily. Educate yourselves to habits of kindness. Then it will become habitual. I will send you a clipping from a paper and you can decide if some dumb beasts are not superior to some men who have allowed themselves to become brutish by their cruel course of action to dumb animals."<sup>10</sup>

White emphasized the importance of treating animals well and avoiding cruel treatment of them.

Ellen White herself has been a vegetarian since 1863, since the first health visions she received in Otsego,<sup>11</sup> but under certain circumstances, she still sometimes consumes meat, when other foods are difficult to obtain.<sup>12</sup>

When in 1894, while she was in Australia, after finishing a lecture, White was approached by a Catholic woman, who asked her if she still ate meat. Upon learning that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> H. C. Jackson, MD, "Flesh as Food for Man," in *Health or How To Live*, ed. James White, (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press Of The Seventh-Day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 27. diakses tanggal 22 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1455.2#6>.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White, Letter 26, 1868, *Letters and Manuscripts vol. 1, 1844–1868* (Ellen G. White Estate), 2–3. diakses tanggal 22 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/13961.2958001>.

<sup>11</sup> Rooger W. Coon, "Ellen White and Vegetarianism: Did She Practice What She Preached?", (Ellen White Estate). Diakses tanggal 30 November 2023 dari <https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-vegetarian-html/#RH,%20Oct%208>.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938) 394. Diakses tanggal 30 November dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/384.3093#3301>.

Ellen White still ate meat, the woman tearfully begged her to consider the suffering of animals in slaughterhouses. From then on, White never touched meat again.<sup>13</sup>

**A Life Connected to Nature through the Concept of Country Living.** In the early days of the Adventist movement, the movement faced a period of transition. This transition period was the end of the first industrial revolution and the beginning of the second. The massive urbanization in Europe as a result of the first industrial revolution gave rise to an anti-urbanization movement in America around 1790-1850.<sup>14</sup> This is the background to the historical context of country living. In 1876, Ellen White wrote:

"To live in the country would be very beneficial to them [children]; an active, out-of-door life would develop health of both mind and body. They should have a garden to cultivate, where they might find both amusement and useful employment. The training of plants and flowers tends to the improvement of taste and judgment, while an acquaintance with God's useful and beautiful creations has a refining and ennobling influence upon the mind, referring it to the Maker and Master of all."<sup>15</sup>

Ellen White encouraged children to grow up in an environment connected to nature, so as to have an awareness and care of creation and a knowledge of God through objects in nature. She said, "The objects of nature should be seen as a textbook for His children to study and from which they can gain knowledge of the growth of the soul."<sup>16</sup>

Ellen White also saw nature as a textbook that God gave to man to learn the knowledge of God. She stated that "God has revealed Himself to us in His creation. Through the inspired books and the book of nature, we are to acquire a knowledge of God."<sup>17</sup>

So the Adventist Church's thinking about the importance of caring for nature traces back to the pioneers' idea of environmental stewardship, which reflects ethical values and responsibility for God's creation.

## **The Ecological Views of the Adventist Church in the Era of Climate Crisis**

Ecological views in the early development of the Adventist Church were not related to global environmental issues. This is because discussions about global warming only became a trend in the 20th century and received serious attention later in the 21st century. This means that the early understanding of Adventists was only about local environmental issues.

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<sup>13</sup> "Understanding Ellen White: Becoming a Strict Vegetarian", *EGW Writings. Org.* Diakses tanggal 23 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/13959.1126>.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Byung Chong Rho, "Improving the Understanding and Practice of Country Living in the Gorgia Central Korean SDA Church" *Proffesional Dissertation DMin* (1994). 635. Diakses 23 November 2023 dari <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1646&context=dmin>

<sup>15</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, jld. 4 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1876), 136. Diakses tanggal 30 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/114.689#689>.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen G. White, *Membina Kehidupan Abadi*, (Bandung: Indonesia Publishing House), 64. Diakses tanggal 30 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/id/book/12870.287#287>.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, *Para Nabi dan Bapa*, jld. 2, (Bandung: Indonesia Publishing House), 202. Diakses 30 November dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/id/book/11725.920#920>.

Currently the Adventist Church is faced with the challenge of the ecological crisis, where the ecological understanding of the pioneers about the value of caring for the environment has become the basis for the Church to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the environment. Currently, the Adventist Church is not behind in taking a theological stance on environmental concerns. Adventist World magazine writes, "What organization is better placed to rise to this challenge than the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Enshrined in our 28 Fundamental Beliefs is the doctrine of stewardship, which summarizes the church's ecological perspective, stating that "we are God's stewards, entrusted by Him with time and opportunities, abilities and possessions, and the blessing of the earth and its resources. We are responsible to Him for their proper use."<sup>18</sup>

Today's environmental issues have become a serious concern of the Adventist Church. Therefore, the Church officially gives the following statement entitled "Concern for the Environment" as follows:

"The world in which we live is a gift of love from the Creator God, from "Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7; 11:17, 18). Within this creation, He placed humans, set intentionally in relationship with Himself, other persons, and the surrounding world. Therefore, as Seventh-day Adventists, we hold its preservation and nurture to be intimately related to our service to Him.

God set aside the seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial and perpetual reminder of His creative act and establishment of the world. In resting on that day, Seventh-day Adventists reinforce the special sense of relationship with the Creator and His creation. Sabbath observance underscores the importance of our integration with the total environment.

The human decision to disobey God broke the original order of creation, resulting in a disharmony alien to His purposes. Thus, our air and waters are polluted, forests and wildlife plundered, and natural resources exploited. Because we recognize humans as part of God's creation, our concern for the environment extends to personal health and lifestyle. We advocate a wholesome manner of living and reject the use of substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs that harm the body and consume earth's resources; and we promote a simple vegetarian diet.

Seventh-day Adventists are committed to respectful, cooperative relationships among all persons, recognizing our common origin and realizing our human dignity as a gift from the Creator. Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs.

Genuine progress toward caring for our natural environment rests upon both personal and cooperative effort. We accept the challenge to work toward restoring God's overall design. Moved by faith in God, we commit ourselves to promote the healing that rises at both personal and environmental levels from integrated lives dedicated to serve God and humanity.

In this commitment we confirm our stewardship of God's creation and believe that total restoration will be complete only when God makes all things new."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Richard De Lissler, "Adventists and Ecology", *Adventist World Online* (2019), <https://www.adventistworld.org/adventists-and-ecology/>

<sup>19</sup> Pernyataan ini disetujui dan dipilih oleh Komite Eksekutif Gereja Masehi Advent Hari Ketujuh General Conference pada sesi Dewan Tahunan di Silver Spring, Maryland, 12 Oktober 1992. Diakses tanggal 23

Concerning Environmental Stewardship, the Church officially stated,

"Seventh-day Adventists believe that humankind was created in the image of God, thus representing God as His stewards, to rule the natural environment in a faithful and fruitful way.

Unfortunately, corruption and exploitation have been brought into the management of the human domain of responsibility. Increasingly men and women have been involved in a megalomaniacal destruction of the earth's resources, resulting in widespread suffering, environmental disarray, and the threat of climate change. While scientific research needs to continue, it is clear from the accumulated evidence that the increasing emission of destructive gasses, the depletion of the protective mantle of ozone, the massive destruction of the American forests, and the so-called greenhouse effect, are all threatening the earth's eco-system.

These problems are largely due to human selfishness and the egocentric pursuit of getting more and more through ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption and depletion of nonrenewable resources. The ecological crisis is rooted in humankind's greed and refusal to practice good and faithful stewardship within the divine boundaries of creation.

Seventh-day Adventists advocate a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled consumerism, goods-getting, and production of waste. We call for respect of creation, restraint in the use of the world's resources, reevaluation of one's needs, and reaffirmation of the dignity of created life."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, concerning Climate Change, the Church continue stated,

"Scientists warn that the gradual warming of the atmosphere as a result of human activity will have serious environmental consequences. The climate will change, resulting in more storms, more floods, and more droughts.

To keep climate change within bearable limits, the emissions of greenhouse gasses, especially carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), need to be significantly reduced. Industrialized countries are the main source of these emissions, while the first victims are the small island states and low-lying coastal countries. Despite the clear risks, governments appear slow to act.

The world membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church requests that the governments concerned take steps necessary to avert the danger:

- 1) By fulfilling the agreement reached in Rio de Janeiro (1992 Convention on Climate Change) to stabilize carbon dioxide emissions by the year 2000 at 1990 levels,
- 2) By establishing plans for further reductions in carbon dioxide emissions after the year 2000, and
- 3) By initiating more forcefully public debate on the risks of climate change.

In signing this statement, Seventh-day Adventists declare their advocacy of a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled

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November 2023 dari <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2019/adventist-churchs-official-statements-climate-change-environment-and-stewardship-earth>.

<sup>20</sup> Pernyataan ini disetujui dan dipilih oleh Komite Administratif Gereja Masehi Advent Hari Ketujuh General Conference (ADCOM) dan dirilis oleh Kantor Presiden, Robert S. Folkenberg, pada sesi General Conference di Utrecht, Belanda, 29 Juni-Juli 8 tahun 1995. Diakses tanggal 23 November 2023 dsri <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2019/adventist-churchs-official-statements-climate-change-environment-and-stewardship-earth>

consumerism and production of waste. They call for respect of creation, restraint in the use of the world's resources, and reevaluation of our needs as individuals."<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the position of the Adventist Church's ecological perspective is very clear regarding its concern for the environment.

### **The concept of environmental stewardship in the Adventist Church**

Stewardship is part of the fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church, which includes treasure, time, talents, body, and earth/environment. The creation story provides deep theological implications regarding the clear principle of environmental stewardship.

### **Biblical Basis of Environmental Stewardship**

An understanding of environmental stewardship is built on the foundation that the earth and everything in it belongs to God. "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." (Psalm 24:1). The Lord God is the owner, "the land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23)<sup>22</sup> but it was created to be managed by humans. On the one hand, humans are an integral part of the ecosystem and do not stand apart from the environment that God designed to live in harmony, but at the same time, humans are separate and distinct from the rest of creation because they are made in the image and likeness of God. The position of man is "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5,6), which gives man his distinction from the rest of creation on earth.

Man is given the privilege of being God's steward on earth. He wants man to be part of the stewardship of His creation as the image and likeness of God. God said: "Let Us make man in Our image and likeness, that they may have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God blessed them, and God said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26, 28). These verses show that man as created in the image and likeness of God is entrusted with the power to manage this earth.

The verbs used in Genesis 1:26,28 for "rule" in Hebrew are *kavash* (כָּבַשׁ) and the word *radah* (רָדָה). These words have the basic meaning of "rule" or "rule over" and are often used in the context of power or authority given to someone to rule or manage something.<sup>23</sup> However, it is important to note that "ruling" in this context should not be interpreted as domination or exploitation that is destructive to the natural environment. Rather, it should be understood within the overall context of creation, where it is humanity's responsibility to be wise and responsible stewards of God's creation, maintain the balance of the ecosystem, and protect the sustainability of the universe.

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<sup>21</sup> Pernyataan ini disetujui dan dipilih oleh General Conference Komite Administratif Masehi Advent Hari Ketujuh (ADCOM) pada tanggal 19 Desember 1995. Diakses tanggal 23 November 2023 dari <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2019/adventist-churchs-official-statements-climate-change-environment-and-stewardship-earth>

<sup>22</sup> Semua ayat Alkitab diambil dari Alkitab LAI (2008)

<sup>23</sup> Tomasz Twardziłowski, "The Command to Rule over the Creation (Gen 1:26-28) in the Ecological" *Collectanea Theologica* 87 (2017) no. 1, 5–24. Diakses 23 November 2023 dari <https://czasopisma.uksw.edu.pl/index.php/ct/article/view/7496>.

**God's Image and Likeness.** In the creation story, in Genesis 1:26,27, God created man in His image and likeness. The Hebrew noun *tselem* (צֶלֶם) is "image" and the word *demut* (דְּמוּת) is translated "likeness". The meaning of the image and likeness of God or *Imago Dei* has invited much discussion from theologians.

Suryanica Pasuhuk outlines three theological views of the image and likeness of God, namely: substantive, functional, and relational. Pasuhuk explains the functional view of the image and likeness of God as follows, "The image and likeness of God focuses on what human beings do as the highest creation. The image and likeness of God exists in human beings as they carry out God's mandate to rule over the rest of creation."<sup>24</sup> Thus, the capacity of humans, who are created in the image and likeness of God, to exercise the authority given by God means that humans must exercise their authority with the example of God exercising His authority in the universe, namely not acting as arbitrary rulers, but as protectors who exercise authority based on love.

The account of creation also emphasizes care for animals as manifestations of God's image and likeness. Concern for animal life is shown by God which is also found in other verses outside the creation story. In the story of the flood (Genesis 6-9) God saves animals and humans from the disaster of the flood, even in certain cases God treats humans and animals equally, "For all the firstborn of the children of Israel are mine, both man and beast" (Numbers 8:17); "O LORD, thou preserves man and beast" (Psalm 36:6).

God loves both humans and animals and all of His creation, Ellen White describes how Jesus treated animals, "Mary often rebuked Jesus, and urged Him to follow the customs of the rabbis. But He could not be persuaded to change His habit of contemplating the works of God's hands and trying to relieve human suffering, even the suffering of dumb animals."<sup>25</sup> That is why, as the image and likeness of God, human life and character must reflect the love of God in managing God's property entrusted to them.

**Human Responsibility in the Garden of Eden.** According to the information in Genesis 2:15, humans were placed in an ecosystem, the Garden of Eden, which means that humans do not live in isolation, but are part of nature. The word "Garden" comes from the Hebrew word, *gan* (גַּן) which is similar and related to the word *pardes* (פְּרִדִּים) meaning: forest, garden, or park.<sup>26</sup>

Man's function when placed by God in the Garden of Eden was to "cultivate" and "care". The word used "to cultivate" is *le'avdah* which comes from the root *avad* (עָבַד) which means "to serve", "to worship" or "to work", and "to maintain" in Hebrew. While "to keep" comes from the root *shamar* (שָׁמַר) which means "to care for" or "to guard/to keep"<sup>27</sup> which means that the purpose of mankind being placed by God in the garden of Eden is to serve God and as guardians of all God's possessions in the world.

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<sup>24</sup> Suryanica A. Pasuhuk, "Evaluasi Teologis Tiga Pandangan Manusia Diciptakan Menurut Gambar dan Rupa Allah", *Airmadidi, Universitas Klabat: Jurnal Fakultas Filsafat* (2012), 2-4. Diakses tanggal 23 November 2023

<sup>25</sup> Ellen G. White, *Kerinduan Segala Zaman*, vol.2, (Ellen G. White Estate) 84. Diakses tanggal 22 November 2023 dari <https://m.egwwritings.org/id/book/13842.328>

<sup>26</sup> Rita Wahyu, "Firdaus", *Sarapan Pagi Biblika* (2006). Diakses 23 November 2023 dari <https://www.sarapanpagi.org/firdal>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://biblehub.com/genesis/2-15.htm#lexicon>



The relationship between ecology and theology is contained in the concept of environmental stewardship. How humans and nature interact to sustain life itself is God's goal for harmony in the environment of His creation on earth. The Adventist Church recognizes that humans are given the responsibility as stewards of the earth (Genesis 2:15), "We are stewards of this world, and must make every effort to sustain life at all levels by maintaining the full ecological balance."<sup>28</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's concern about the environment has been evident since the early days of the Adventist movement. The Adventist Church's idea of environmental care is part of the basic beliefs of stewardship life. Until today, the Adventist Church still expresses a clear and firm stance regarding the Church's concern for the environment.

The current ecological crisis is the shared responsibility of every human being, and the church must be at the forefront of overcoming this crisis. Man's responsibility to God as His steward is a privilege, the management of God's property must reflect the image and likeness of God, who manages creation with love.

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<sup>28</sup> *Apa Yang Perlu Anda Ketahui Tentang... 28 Uraian Doktrin Dasar Alkitabiah*, (Bandung: Indonesia Publishing House, 2006), 312-313.

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