



Green ELCSA

ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS MAPPING

Narrative Analysis (April 2026)

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2026, Green ELCSA initiated an Environmental Needs Mapping process as a foundational step toward strengthening the church's response to environmental, climate, and energy-related challenges.

This process was launched through an open invitation shared widely in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), reaching congregants, leaders, and members across parishes, circuits, dioceses, and churchwide bodies, as far as networks and communication channels allowed.

The invitation called on members of the church to participate in a collective process of reflection and discernment.

At its heart was a simple but urgent question: how is the church experiencing and responding to the environmental realities affecting its people and communities today?

Recognising that these challenges are not only global but deeply local and lived, the initiative sought to listen intentionally to the voices within the church, particularly those on the ground who encounter these realities daily.

Participants were invited to contribute either by completing a structured questionnaire or through direct engagement via conversations and follow-up discussions.

This flexible approach allowed for broader participation and created space for both quantitative inputs and more contextual insights.

Members were also encouraged to share the invitation within their own networks, reinforcing the collective and participatory nature of the process.

Over a period of three months, responses were gathered, reviewed, and consolidated. This extended timeframe was not only practical but necessary, allowing space for engagement across different regions, structures, and levels of accessibility.

It also reflected the reality of working within a diverse and decentralised church, where participation often depends on relational outreach and trust-building rather than formal channels alone.

The purpose of this Environmental Needs Mapping was not merely to collect data, but to begin shaping a shared understanding of the environmental realities facing ELCSA today.

The process aimed to identify key challenges, assess levels of awareness and capacity, and surface existing strengths and opportunities within the church.

Importantly, it also sought to lay the groundwork for deeper engagement, both theologically and practically, on issues of creation care and environmental justice.

The findings presented in this report are therefore not an endpoint, but a starting point.

They are intended to inform a forthcoming joint workshop, where these insights will be collectively reflected upon, validated, and translated into concrete priorities and strategies.

This next phase will also focus on identifying and equipping Green ELCSA champions, who will play a critical role in leading and sustaining environmental initiatives within their respective contexts.

Ultimately, this mapping exercise reflects a growing recognition within ELCSA that environmental and climate issues are integral to the life and mission of the church.

It is an invitation to move together, from awareness to action, from isolated efforts to coordinated response, and from concern to faithful stewardship of God's creation.

With gratitude to all who participated and contributed their voices to this process, this report seeks to honour those insights and to support the journey ahead.

STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

The environmental needs mapping exercise offers a deeply revealing picture of how climate and environmental realities are being experienced, understood, and engaged within ELCSA structures.

While the dataset is modest in size, the consistency of responses across categories paints a clear and compelling story: environmental challenges are not distant or abstract concerns, but are already shaping the everyday lives, livelihoods, and spiritual contexts of church communities.

The profile of respondents reflects a strong grounding at the parish level, with the majority of participants identifying from parish structures.

This suggests that the findings are closely tied to the lived experiences of local congregations rather than institutional or policy-level perspectives. At the same time, the gender distribution - significantly skewed toward male respondents - hints at a participation gap that may also reflect broader dynamics within church leadership and engagement spaces.

This imbalance raises important questions about whose voices are shaping environmental discourse within the church, and whose perspectives may still need to be more intentionally included.

Geographically, the responses are concentrated in certain dioceses, particularly the South Eastern Diocese. While this provides valuable insight into specific regional realities, it also suggests that the overall picture may not yet fully represent the diversity of contexts across ELCSA.

Nonetheless, the themes that emerge are strikingly consistent and resonate with broader national and global climate trends.

One of the most important findings is the level of awareness of environmental and climate issues within church structures.

Most respondents place awareness at a moderate level, indicating that while people are not unfamiliar with these issues, their understanding is not yet deep or fully developed.

This middle-ground awareness reflects a church that is conscious of environmental challenges but has not yet fully integrated them into its theological reflection, teaching, or mission practice.

The presence of a significant proportion of respondents with low awareness further underscores the need for intentional education and formation.

What is particularly telling is the nature of the issues that are most commonly discussed.

Conversations within church spaces are largely shaped by immediate and tangible concerns - water scarcity, energy access, and load shedding dominate the discourse.

These are issues that directly affect daily life, household stability, and community wellbeing. Climate change itself is discussed, but often through the lens of these practical realities rather than as a broader systemic or global issue.

In contrast, topics such as biodiversity loss, environmental justice, and pollution receive comparatively less attention. This suggests that environmental engagement is currently rooted more in survival and adaptation than in systemic critique or justice-oriented frameworks.

At the same time, the data makes it unmistakably clear that environmental challenges are being felt intensely within communities. Extreme heat stands out as a universal experience, reported by all respondents, while flooding, drought, water pollution, and waste dumping are also widely cited.

These challenges are not isolated environmental events; they intersect with economic pressures, particularly the rising cost of living linked to energy insecurity.

In this sense, environmental degradation is experienced not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a socio-economic burden that deepens existing inequalities.

This intersection becomes even more apparent when respondents reflect on who is most affected. There is a strong and shared recognition that climate impacts are not evenly distributed.

Children, youth, the elderly, and poor households are consistently identified as the most vulnerable, alongside rural communities and those living in informal settlements.

This awareness reflects an implicit understanding of climate justice, that those who contribute least to environmental harm are often those who suffer its consequences most severely. It is a powerful foundation upon which a more explicit theological and advocacy-oriented response could be built.

Despite this awareness, there remains a noticeable gap in how environmental issues are integrated into the spiritual life of the church. Preaching, teaching, and Bible studies do not consistently engage with themes of creation care or environmental justice.

For many respondents, such engagement happens only occasionally or rarely, and for a significant portion, not at all.

This disconnect suggests that while environmental realities are present in people's lives, they are not yet fully reflected in the church's theological language or liturgical practice.

The theological themes that are currently used provide important insight into both the strengths and limitations of existing engagement.

Themes such as care for the poor, God's creation, healing, and restoration are relatively prominent, indicating that there is already a moral and spiritual vocabulary that can support environmental work.

However, concepts such as stewardship of creation and justice are less consistently emphasized, and environmental issues are not always explicitly framed within these theological categories.

This suggests that the church does not need to build a theology of creation care from scratch, but rather to deepen and connect existing theological understandings more intentionally to environmental realities.

Leadership emerges as another critical area of concern. The data indicates that many leaders do not feel confident in addressing environmental justice from a theological perspective.

This lack of confidence is not necessarily a reflection of unwillingness, but rather of limited exposure, training, and resources.

Leaders may recognise the importance of these issues, but feel uncertain about how to articulate them in sermons, teachings, or church programmes.

This points to a clear need for capacity-building that equips leaders with both theological grounding and practical tools.

When it comes to action on the ground, the findings reveal a significant gap between awareness and implementation.

The majority of respondents report that there are no environmental or community initiatives within their structures, or they are unsure whether such initiatives exist. Where activities are present, such as tree planting, community gardens, or clean-up campaigns, they tend to be small-scale, fragmented, and not widely coordinated.

This suggests that while there is willingness and some level of activity, it is not yet being harnessed into a cohesive or sustained movement.

Closely related to this is the question of leadership and coordination. There is no clear or consistent structure responsible for environmental work.

In some cases, initiatives are led by individual community members, municipalities, or informal groups, rather than by established church structures.

The absence of defined leadership roles or committees points to an institutional gap that limits the church's ability to respond strategically and collectively.

At the same time, the data highlights important strengths within ELCSA that provide a strong foundation for future work.

Leadership commitment and organisational capacity are widely recognised, suggesting that the church has the internal structures and relational networks needed to mobilise action.

Partnerships are also identified as an existing asset, pointing to opportunities for collaboration with external stakeholders. However, these strengths are currently constrained by limited environmental knowledge, insufficient resources, and the absence of coordinated strategy.

The question of where environmental work should be coordinated offers further insight into how members envision moving forward. There is a clear preference for action at the congregational level, reflecting the importance of local ownership and contextual relevance.

At the same time, there is recognition that parish and diocesan structures also have a role to play. This points toward a model of coordination that is both bottom-up and supported by broader institutional frameworks.

Taken together, these findings reveal a church that is already situated within the realities of climate change, but is still in the early stages of articulating and organising its response.

There is awareness, there is concern, and there is a strong ethical and theological foundation, but there is not yet a fully developed or institutionalised approach to environmental justice.

This moment presents a significant opportunity for Green ELCSA. The data suggests that the groundwork already exists for a transformative response, one that connects lived experience with theological reflection, and local action with broader advocacy.

By strengthening awareness, equipping leaders, and establishing clear structures for coordination, Green ELCSA can help the church move from fragmented engagement to a more coherent and impactful witness.

Ultimately, this is not only about environmental issues, but about the identity and mission of the church in a time of ecological crisis.

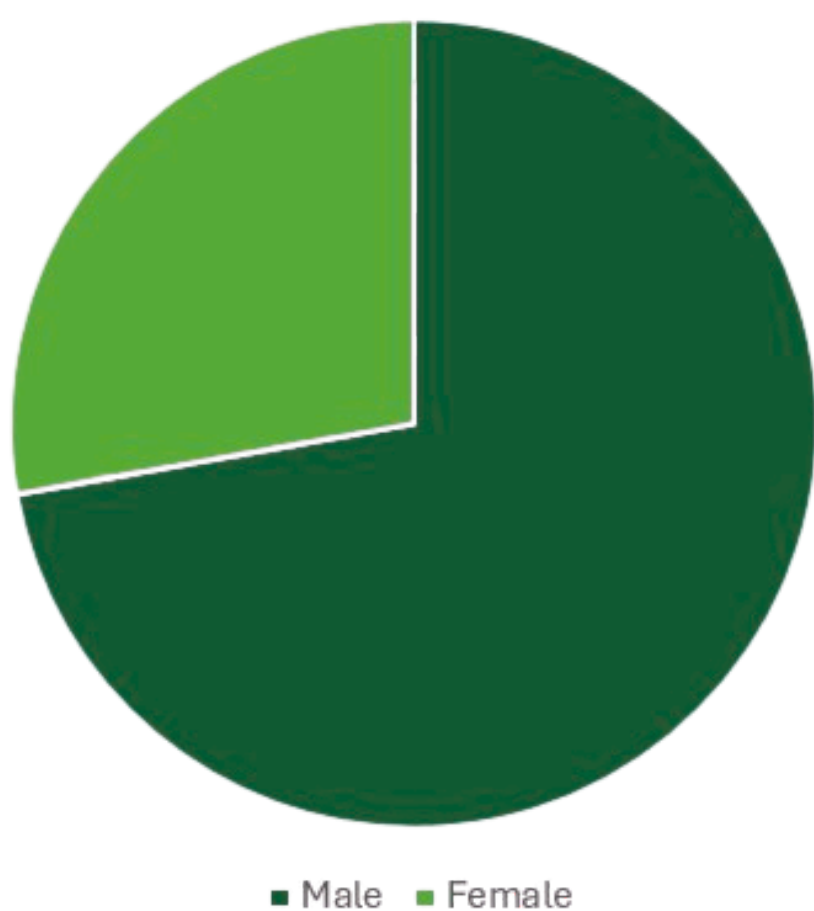
The voices captured in this mapping exercise point toward a church that is called to respond, not only in words, but in action, solidarity, and prophetic leadership.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Respondent Profile and Representation

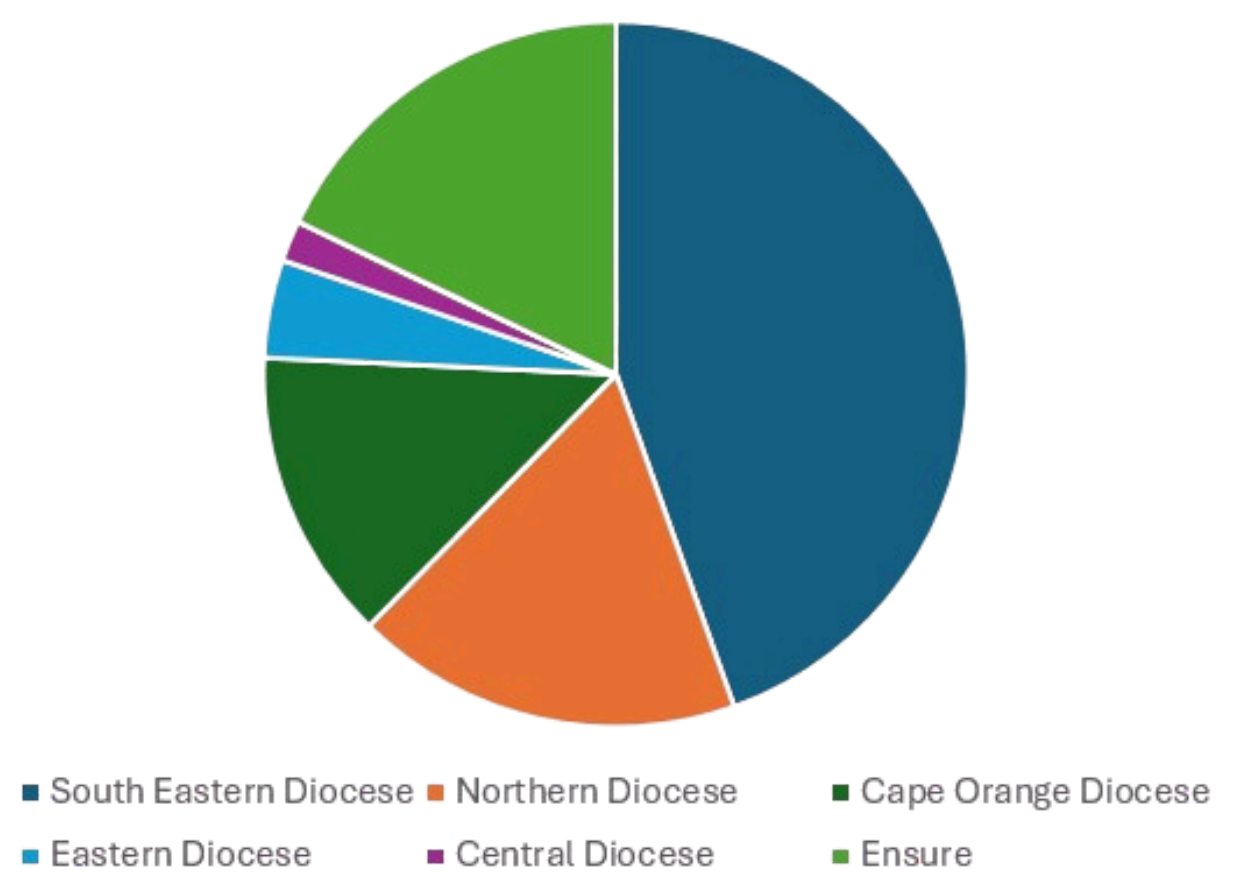
The survey gathered responses from 85 participants across different questions, with representation across church structures.

Gender distribution



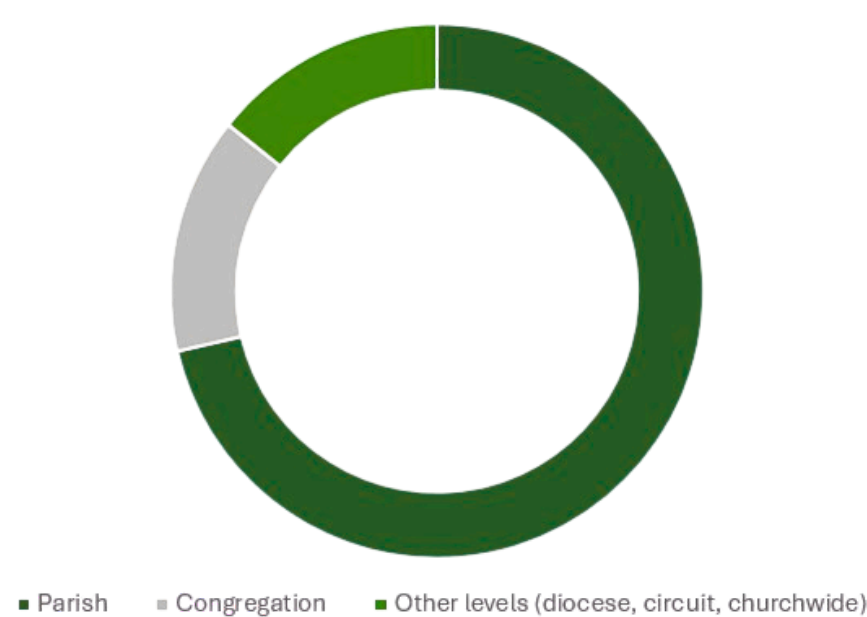
This suggests a gender imbalance, with male voices more represented. There may be a need to intentionally include more women in future engagements.

Geographic (Diocesan) Spread



The data is regionally concentrated, especially in the South Eastern Diocese. Future mapping should aim for balanced diocesan representation.

Church structure representation



The data is heavily parish-centered, meaning findings strongly reflect local church realities rather than broader institutional perspectives.

AWARENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE ISSUES

- Most responses cluster at Level 3 (42.9%)
- Followed by Level 1 (33.3%) and Level 2 (19%)
- Very few at Levels 4-5

Interpretation: Awareness is moderate but not deep, and there is a significant portion with low awareness. There is a strong need for education, theological grounding, and awareness-building across church structures.

ISSUES COMMONLY DISCUSSED

Top issues:

- Water scarcity: 76.2%
- Load shedding / energy insecurity: 76.2%
- Energy access: 66.7%
- Climate change: 57.1%

Less discussed:

- Waste management: 33.3%
- Food insecurity: 38.1%
- Pollution & environmental justice: ~23.8%
- Biodiversity: very low (14.3%)

Insight:

- Discussions are practical and immediate (water, electricity)
- Systemic/environmental justice issues are less engaged
- Green ELCSA can bridge practical concerns with deeper justice theology.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED

Top challenges:

- Extreme heat: 100%
- High cost of living (energy-linked): 76.2%
- Waste dumping: 57.1%
- Flooding & water pollution: 52.4%
- Drought: 47.6%

Insight:

- Climate change is not abstract, it is lived reality
- Communities face both climate and socio-economic impacts
- This strongly supports positioning climate justice as a livelihood, economic, and dignity issue, not just environmental.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED?

- Children: 95.2%
- Youth: 90.5%
- Poor households: 81%
- Elderly: 76.2%
- Rural & informal communities: 71.4%
- Insight: There is clear recognition of climate injustice and vulnerability.
- Theological opportunity - strong alignment with:
 - "Care for the poor"
 - "Justice and dignity"
 - "Protection of future generations"

INTEGRATION INTO CHURCH LIFE (PREACHING & TEACHING)

- Sometimes: 28.6%
- Never: 28.6%
- Rarely: 23.8%
- Regularly: only 14.3%
- Insight: Environmental issues are not consistently integrated into theology or preaching.
- Critical gap: There is a disconnect between lived reality and theological engagement.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES CURRENTLY USED

Most common:

- Care for the poor: 57.1%
- God's creation: 47.6%
- Sin and repentance: 42.9%
- Healing and restoration: 42.9%

Less emphasized:

- Stewardship of creation: 33.3%
- Justice and injustice: 28.6%

Insight:

- Theology exists, but is not fully framed as environmental justice
- Strong base for developing eco-theology

LEADERSHIP CONFIDENCE

Majority fall between low to moderate confidence (levels 1-3)

Insight: Leaders are not fully equipped to address environmental justice theologically.

Need:

- Training
- Resources
- Practical tools for preaching & teaching

EXISTING INITIATIVES (LIMITED BUT IMPORTANT):

- Tree planting (23.8%)
- Community gardens (23.8%)
- Clean-ups & recycling (14.3%)

Observation: Initiatives are fragmented and small-scale, and there is no strong coordination

ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

- Yes: 19%
- No: 61.9%
- Not sure: 19%

Insight: Most structures do not have active initiatives, or members are unaware of them (both in church and or community).

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS

- No environmental committees: 76.2%
- Only a small minority have structured responsibility
- Conclusion: Environmental work is not institutionalised

LEADERSHIP OF INITIATIVES

Responses show:

- No clear leadership structure
- Some led by community members, municipality, parish members

Many responses: "n/a" or unclear

Insight: There is a leadership and coordination gap

STRENGTHS WITHIN THE CHURCH

- Strongest assets:
- Leadership commitment: 66.7%
- Organising capacity: 61.9%
- Partnerships: 33.3%
- Weak areas:
- Environmental knowledge: 9.5%
- Community trust (low reported)
- Financial resources: limited
- Insight: The church has strong organisational potential, but lacks
- Necessary/relevant knowledge
- Resources
- Strategic direction

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS

- No environmental committees: 76.2%
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Conclusion: Environmental work is not institutionalised

PREFERRED LEVEL OF COORDINATION

- Congregation: 52.4% (highest)
- Parish: 33.3%
- Diocese: 19%

Insight: Strong preference for localised action, but this must be supported by higher-level coordination

KEY STRATEGIC CONCLUSIONS

High lived experience, and low institutional response: communities are deeply affected by climate issues, but church structures are not yet responding systematically.

CLOSING REFLECTION

This assessment reveals a church that is:

- Deeply embedded in communities experiencing climate impacts
- Rich in moral and organisational potential
- Yet under-equipped and under-structured to respond fully

This presents a powerful opportunity: Green ELCSA can become a leading faith-based voice on climate justice, grounded in lived realities, theological conviction, and community transformation.



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