
**'Green Is Where It's At': Cultivating Environmental Concern
at an African American Church**

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, much 'religion and ecology' scholarship has sought to identify theological, ethical, and scriptural resources that suggest all religions teach their followers to protect the earth. Case studies have focused primarily on success stories that demonstrate how religions can contribute to a more sustainable future, but religion and ecology scholarship has paid inadequate attention to cultural complexities involved with cultivating environmental concern in religious communities. This article aims to address some of those neglected factors. A bible study on food, faith, and the environment held at an African American church in Chicago offers a glimpse into a window for exploring how assumptions about ethnicity and class influence the presumed 'greening' of American religion. I argue that efforts to 'green' American religion have relied not only on religious teachings, but also on latent assumptions about ethnicity and class.

Keywords

Greening of religion, African American Protestants, bible study, soul food, ethnicity, class, ethnography, Afrocentrism.

Introduction

At a 2010 national conference for the leaders of religious nonprofits committed to protecting the earth, hidden ethnic tensions became apparent in a conflict over food. Veronica Kyle, representing the Chicago-based interfaith environmental organization 'Faith in Place', had grown increasingly uncomfortable throughout the gathering as one of only two

African Americans among one hundred conference participants, and she finally expressed her concerns when she sat down to a third day of meatless meals.¹ 'See, this is part of the problem', she lamented:

If we're going to try to make this [environmental] movement more diverse, if we want to invite more people in, we need to think about things like this. Because if you had more Black folks here to begin with, they wouldn't be here by now. They would have left the conference and gone out to look for some meat.

Even though Kyle had been vegetarian herself at several points throughout her life, she saw the absence of meat at this conference as a significant cultural barrier that would exclude other African Americans. While the conference's vegetarian menu conveyed alignment with environmental values to most of the diners, to Kyle it represented something else: the exclusivity and cultural insensitivity embedded in a cuisine that catered to the preferences of the conference's affluent white participants.

Kyle's exasperation over the conference organizers' menu reveals the complex role of ideas about ethnicity and class in efforts to 'green' American religion. Since the 1990s a growing body of 'religion and ecology' literature has sought to identify theological and ethical resources to support religious environmentalism, which can be understood as a movement that positions environmental concern as central to every faith. Through texts such as *Religions of the World and Ecology*, which followed a series of conferences held at Harvard University, scholars have examined the scriptures, theologies, doctrines, and traditions of various 'world religions' in an effort to demonstrate that all religions advance positive environmental values. Religious studies professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who organized the conferences and served as the general editors for the subsequent book series, have explained, '[A] major goal of the series was to begin a process of retrieving, reevaluating, and reconstructing the ecological dimensions of the world's religions so as to contribute to a sustaining and flourishing future for the earth community' (2011: 88). Tucker and Grim, along with numerous other religion and ecology scholars, have contributed an activist orientation to the field. Their work is shaped by normative ideals as they strive to make religions 'greener', but they overlook important historical and cultural factors that might support or hinder such efforts.²

1. I attended this conference with Kyle as part of my ethnographic research on Faith in Place. Kyle is a public figure at Faith in Place and thus has granted me permission to use her real name, as have all other Faith in Place leaders. I have assigned pseudonyms to my other interlocutors in this article.

2. For a discussion of scholar activism in religion and ecology, see B. Taylor (2005b).

Through publications such as the *JSRNC* and the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, scholars have urged a more critical approach to understanding the potential connections between religious worldviews and environmentally friendly behaviors (e.g., B. Taylor 2005b; Finnegan 2011; Stuckrad 2007). In a 2011 Editor's Introduction to the *JSRNC*, Bron Taylor calls on scholars to test empirically 'the greening of religion hypothesis' that has dominated religion and nature scholarship. According to this hypothesis, Taylor explains, '[A]s religious people (or some subset of them) become more aware of negative environmental impacts from human behaviors, they are transforming their traditions in more environmentally friendly directions' (2011: 254). Taylor contends that studies defending that hypothesis tend to be problematic because (1) they are anecdotal or based on pre-screened, eco-friendly groups and thus lack social scientific rigor, (2) they fail to demonstrate whether and how religion has contributed to eco-friendly behaviors even when such behaviors are present, and (3) they do not account for the possibility that environmental concern reflects broader cultural values rather than directly arising from religious ideals.

In this article I respond to Taylor's call for more rigorous social-scientific analysis. Drawing from my ethnographic research among participants of Faith in Place and especially Kyle's efforts to recruit African Americans to the organization, I demonstrate how a postulated 'greening' of religion has relied not only on religious teachings but also on latent assumptions about ethnicity and class. I highlight these latent assumptions through an examination of the racialized language used at Faith in Place. In particular, a bible study focusing on food and faith that Kyle organized at an African American church in 2009 offers a window into understanding how involvement with religious environmentalism is wrapped up in negotiations of ethnic and class identities. Kyle helped new Faith in Place participants cultivate a self-consciously black environmentalism that was shaped by essentialized visions of both blackness and whiteness, but her language and emphases shifted when she found herself surrounded by white audiences. By carefully examining negotiations of ethnic identities as central to the history of religious environmentalism, this article complicates ideas about religious environmentalism as a direct expression of religious beliefs.

Methodology

My research for this project was ethnographic, comprising participant-observation and ethnographic interviews. I met Kyle in 2008 when she joined the staff of Faith in Place, an interfaith environmental nonprofit wherein I was conducting research to determine whether, to what extent,

and if so how and why this organization effectively instilled environmental concern among religious communities in Chicago. Faith in Place was founded in 1999 by Rev. Dr. Clare Butterfield, a white Unitarian Universalist minister. It originated as a project of the Center for Neighborhood Technology—an urban sustainability think tank—and incorporated as an independent nonprofit in 2003. Faith in Place leaders offer programming intended to help congregations develop a ‘culture of environmental awareness’ through which participants across the congregation understand earth stewardship as central to religious life. Focusing on food, energy, and water, it offers worship resources, educational programming, and practical support for green infrastructural projects. Faith in Place also engages in environmental policy advocacy in partnership with the Illinois Environmental Council.

Faith in Place seemed a promising field site for examining the greening of religion hypothesis because its promotional materials and popular media coverage indicated it had already inculcated environmental concern among widespread religious communities. Based on my initial examination of the organization’s work, it appeared to support the optimistic idea that all religions are incorporating efforts to protect the environment as fundamental matters of faith. When I began to consider Faith in Place as a field site in 2006, it claimed to have partnered with over a hundred congregations in Illinois representing nine different faith traditions: Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i, Zoroastrian, and Unitarian.³ A 2007 *Chicago Magazine* article honored Faith in Place with a green award praising the organization for its ability to unite communities across differences of faith (Johnson 2007). That same year the organization’s eco-Halal program was featured in the documentary film *Renewal* (Ostrow and Rockefeller 2008). These popular media outlets seemed to confirm Faith in Place’s role in a postulated greening of religion, but I wanted to conduct research in order to ascertain the extent to which that was true.

Between 2006 and 2011 I carried out extensive ethnographic research at Faith in Place, working in the office as a volunteer, attending staff and board meetings, conducting ethnographic interviews, and participating in worship services and events at partner congregations. A focus on assumptions about ethnicity and class emerged organically through my research, as Faith in Place leaders aspired to diversify their organization’s membership by involving congregations from Chicago’s predominately African American south and west sides. In 2008 they hired Kyle to spearhead those efforts. By accompanying Kyle as she worked with

3. As of 2014 Faith in Place claims more than a thousand congregational partners.

African American congregations, I saw how Faith in Place's messages shifted to attract those communities. In particular, a bible study on food and faith that Kyle organized on Chicago's south side places in sharp relief the process by which she convinced African Americans to become involved with Faith in Place. Taking place just over a year after Kyle joined the staff, the bible study was one of her first sustained recruitment efforts, and through the group she developed her approach for attracting others.

The bible study was held at a United Church of Christ (UCC) congregation on Chicago's south side and drew participants from a consortium of African American UCC congregations. Eight women from three churches participated regularly, while two of their husbands, the church's male pastor, and a few other women attended periodically.⁴ All participants and leaders were African American. All but one were college graduates, and several held postsecondary degrees.⁵ The timing of the group, which met at one p.m. on Thursdays, catered mainly to retirees, although a couple of younger women had flexible schedules and managed to attend most of the meetings.

Kyle's agenda during the bible study and across her work at Faith in Place was shaped by her desire to move beyond the singular focus on environmental racism that has dominated conversations about the environment in minority communities. While recognizing the important contributions of environmental justice activists for improving conditions in minority and impoverished communities, Kyle specifically targeted middle-class congregations in her outreach efforts. She frequently pointed out that African Americans are middle class too, and should become involved in the same kinds of environmental conversations as their white neighbors.⁶ In keeping with her goal of displaying

4. The preponderance of women at Faith in Place events was a constant throughout my fieldwork. A 2014 analysis of Faith in Place's membership found twice as many female as male supporters (Voter Action Network 2014). Although Faith in Place leaders did not intentionally target women, the organization's staff was almost entirely female (they hired one man, Brian Sauder, as an organizer and lobbyist in 2009; in 2014 Sauder replaced Butterfield as executive director) as was most of the board. Numerous factors, including the prevalence of women in religious life and volunteer work, can account for the female imbalance.

5. The one woman who was not a college graduate was in the process of finishing her degree and has since completed a postsecondary degree.

6. This focus on the middle class might come as a surprise given that conversations about the environment as it relates to minority communities tends to focus on issues of environmental justice and ways that environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor. However, among Faith in Place's supporters overall, 73%

middle-class respectability, Kyle tended to steer participants toward moderate environmentalist positions.⁷

In 2009, Kyle invited me to attend the first meeting of the bible study dedicated to a discussion of *Just Eating? Practicing Our Faith at the Table*, a book published by the Presbyterian Hunger Program (2004). At the beginning of the meeting I introduced myself as a graduate student researching Faith in Place's efforts to green religious communities in Chicago, and I gained the participants' consent to continue attending their weekly bible study sessions. That summer I was a participant-observer at five of their seven meetings, and I conducted follow-up interviews with Kyle and five of the participants one year later. As a white graduate student conducting research among African Americans on Chicago's south side, I initially encountered some suspicious glances, and Kyle informed me that some bible study participants asked her privately what I was doing there. However, both Kyle and the members of the bible study told me they appreciated that I was not focusing my research exclusively on African American neighborhoods. Over time the bible study members came to treat me kindly and with warm hospitality, inviting me to their homes and churches.

During the bible study and interviews, I wanted to learn how the women understood environmentalism and their relationship to it, and whether and how they used the frame of religion to reinterpret standard environmental tropes. I also wanted to see how Kyle would adapt Faith in Place's message to recruit them. As the first major project Kyle organized at Faith in Place, the bible study functioned as a focus group in which Kyle developed her approach for involving African Americans in religious environmentalism. She applied lessons from that group to her recruiting strategies for Faith in Place and in subsequent years attracted over 800 African Americans to involvement with the organization. By 2014, African Americans represented 19% of Faith in Place's overall supporters, according to an analysis of Faith in Place's

have annual household incomes of at least \$50,000, so Kyle's focus on the middle class is congruous with the organization's work among all ethnic groups.

7. Faith in Place leaders all tended to embrace moderate environmentalist positions. Their strategic aims involved bringing new participants to the environmental movement, and they shied away from positions that might alienate potential 'environmental converts'. Executive Director Butterfield embraced anthropocentric ethics and taught staff members to talk about the implications of environmental degradation for 'people, not polar bears'. Further, Butterfield surprised many of her allies in Chicago's environmental community when she revealed that she supported the use of nuclear energy, a position she espoused after reading Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Discipline* (2009).

membership database (Voter Action Network 2014). As such, analysis of the *Just Eating?* participants' 'environmental conversions' offers insight into broader diversification efforts at Faith in Place and invites further research on cultural negotiations with regard to a postulated greening of American religion.

Although literature on African Americans and religious environmental thought is limited, a small body of related research has guided this work.⁸ Two books that examine the history of environmental thought among African Americans, Dianne Glave's *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (2010) and a volume Glave edited with Mark Stoll, *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (2006), each dedicate a chapter to the role of religion. In *Rooted in the Earth*, Glave provides an overview of nature-based spirituality among African Americans from the colonial era to the early twentieth century. Focusing mostly on the influence of African spirituality on African American Protestant practices—including a worldview that gives equal significance to the human, spiritual, and environmental realms; a rich history of worshipping in secret wooded places; and a tradition of treating earth shrines and groves as sacred—Glave calls on African Americans to reclaim the 'rich legacy of African American spirituality in nature' by worshiping outdoors and spending time in nature (2010: 43-56).⁹ While Kyle worked to help the bible study participants cultivate a self-consciously black environmentalism, her references to African spiritual traditions were sparse, consisting mostly of her references to an African tradition of 'mother-care'. By contrast she referred extensively to the way things were done 'back in the day', referring to the middle decades of the twentieth century when she and many of the bible study participants were children living in the American South.

In that way conversations during the bible study had more in common with studies of religion and nature in the twentieth-century United States. In 'Religion and African American Environmental Activism', Mark Stoll (2006) provides an overview of environmental work within the black community led by the central institution of the black church in

8. Scholarship on African environmental spirituality is much more extensive than scholarship related specifically to African Americans. See, for example, the many Africa-focused entries in B. Taylor 2005a, 2013; Chepkwony 2008; Gumo et al. 2012.

9. Along similar lines, the writer Alice Walker encourages African Americans to embrace pagan ancestral traditions, as Taylor points out in *Dark Green Religion* (2010: 163-64). Whereas Walker explicitly identifies those traditions as pagan, Glave suggests that variations of 'African spirituality' might include belief in God and lesser divinities, ancestor veneration, and belief in supernatural events (2010: 44).

the last decades of the twentieth century. In the *JSRNC*, Eileen Smith-Cavros (2007) contributed an excellent article on place-centered memories of Bahamian immigrants in Florida. Tobin Miller Shearer (2010) has written about the Mennonite-led Fresh Air program for African American urban youth. Elonda Clay's 'How Does it Feel to be an Environmental Problem?' (2011) challenges the tendency of religion and ecology scholars to consider minority communities exclusively in the context of environmental racism. Other studies of African American environmental issues have likewise noted the need for additional research examining the influence of religion (Smith 2007; D. Taylor 2014).

Crossing the 'Eco-divide' with Food

Until the early twenty-first century African Americans were not widely involved in the mainstream environmental movement for a number of reasons. One of these was a sense of alienation from what one environmental leader has described as the 'John Muir mythology' that separates nature from human activity (Carl Anthony in Stoll 2006: 151). Environmental historian Mark Stoll pointed out in 2006 that environmental and African American leaders had discussed this problem for decades, yet 'American environmental activism [has] narrowed the gap between environmentalist and African American concerns very little, if at all' (2006: 152). The one area in which minority communities have received widespread attention is environmental racism and environmental justice. While the leaders and most participants at mainstream environmental organizations are white, environmental justice campaigns focus on minorities and especially African American communities as the most immediate victims of environmental problems (Bullard 1994; McGurty 2007; Melosi 2006; D. Taylor 1997).

Since its inception in 1999, Faith in Place has aspired to diversify its environmental initiatives by involving participants with diverse ethnic, class, and religious backgrounds. With the hire of Kyle in 2008, Faith in Place began to focus especially on involving African Americans. Prior to 2008, staff members and interns had tried to recruit African Americans using the same techniques they applied to white congregations: talking to clergy leaders about environmental issues and distributing free energy-efficient light bulbs. Kyle initiated a different approach by recruiting participants without immediately discussing issues traditionally considered 'environmental'. As Kyle explained, 'When I first arrived at Faith in Place I told [its leaders], I can't talk about solar panels. I needed to talk about something more relevant, like health and green jobs. But now we're talking about solar panels.'

Kyle's first major initiative at Faith in Place was the above-mentioned bible study on food, faith, and the environment, topics that had previously drawn white supporters to the organization. Following the *Just Eating?* curriculum, the group would discuss units on health, hunger, the environment, and creating community (Schrock 2005a). The curriculum's central theme based on the wordplay of the title was that meals do not *just* involve eating. Rather, every meal contributes to or detracts from justice in the world. The guide encourages Christians to eat more justly because eating entails not *just* a meal, but it is also a central expression of one's values. Starting with a focus on one's own health, it gradually guides one to expand one's concerns to include the people who produce one's food and the environmental implications of one's decisions about what to eat.¹⁰

While Kyle appreciated the *Just Eating?* approach of introducing environmental concerns through conversations about food and faith, she thought the book's images, stories, and cuisines privileged white experiences and would not be appealing to African Americans. She organized the bible study as a focus group and editorial team that would develop an 'Afrocentric' version of the curriculum (Schrock 2005b). As a philosophical concept, Afrocentrism refers to a 1980s intellectual movement to analyze information from a 'black perspective', but Kyle employed the term in the much broader sense described by historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses simply as 'the belief that the African ancestry of black peoples, regardless of where they live, is an inescapable element of their various identities—imposed both from within and from without their own communities' (1998: 6). Throughout the bible study Kyle encouraged participants to connect environmental practices to their own ethnic identities, offering examples of how sustainable behaviors grow directly from African culture and African American history. Her efforts were supported by Anita Walters, a recent seminary graduate in her late twenties who was interested in the environment and organic farming. Faith in Place hired Walters to help Kyle lead the bible study and rewrite the curriculum to reflect the input of the group.

Although the *Just Eating?* curriculum was designed to connect eating with Christian tradition, practices, and rituals, during the bible study sessions that I attended we spent very little time discussing the bible or

10. In keeping with Faith in Place's moderate environmental ethics, the curriculum focuses primarily on the implications of unsustainable habits for humans. When discussing food and the environment the authors describe how factory farms cause soil erosion and water pollution, but they focus more on caring for the humans who produce our food and viewing food as sacred because it is a gift from God.

even Christianity. During the first two meetings we closely followed the *Just Eating?* guide while discussing ways that food connected to health, community, and the environment and ways that eating healthy food could be sacramental. Weekly sessions began with a *lectio divina* during which we read a bible passage several times then commented on what the passage meant in our own lives. These passages all came from the *Just Eating?* guide and were handpicked to reflect potentially eco-friendly themes. But apart from those few instances that we focused closely on the discussion guide, conversations rarely returned to ideas about the bible or Christianity, and in the final few weeks we skipped the *lectio divina* entirely. We followed the book's instructions on eating shared meals, including a healthy food make-over meal, a comfort food potluck, and a hearty communion meal, but rarely discussed any other bible passages referenced in the book. Instead, we diverged from the curriculum in order to discuss specific issues as they related to African American history and culture.

Cultivating Black Environmentalism

During the first meeting the women shared their reasons for participating in the group. One woman mentioned she saw this bible study as an extension of a diabetes and obesity workshop she had attended at church, while another expressed concern that a black-owned grocery store in her neighborhood was moving to the more affluent area of Hyde Park. Other reasons that came up included diabetes prevention, feeding the third world, and eating biblically. In follow-up interviews two women indicated they joined the group largely because of personal invitations from Kyle, whom one described as 'a good salesman'. Aside from the mention of the black-owned grocery store, which points to concerns about food access, none of their reasons directly pertained to standard environmental issues such as climate change, conservation, or pollution.

While comments during the opening session indicated that the women brought a diverse set of motivations to their involvement with the group, Kyle quickly shaped the conversation to prioritize the concerns that drove her work at Faith in Place: a distinct ethnic consciousness focusing on the overwhelming absence of African Americans from the environmental movement. 'We're here because Faith in Place has been part of the *Just Eating?* program for years', Kyle professed to the group, 'but do the words and images speak to the African American community? No!' Kyle asked participants to help her revise the curriculum so it would reflect 'who we are as a people' through considerations of 'ideal meals'

such as collard greens, macaroni, and grits; issues that pertain to justice in African American neighborhoods; and cultural traditions such as 'mother care' that might contribute to an ethic of protecting the earth. Most importantly, she expressed, the women would make history as the first exclusively African American group to participate in this bible study. By becoming experts in environmental issues, she promised, participants would become 'mini environmental celebrities' and receive invitations to speak to audiences across the city.

Having spent years feeling like the lone black woman in an overwhelmingly white environmental movement, Kyle's sense of urgency for diversifying American environmentalism weighed heavily on her mind. Bible study participants, on the other hand, had not been involved in the mainstream environmental movement and did not share Kyle's sense of isolation. One participant told me privately that she neither assigned 'white' or any color to the environmental movement 'because environmentalism has always been around'. Neither did any other participant express any particular sense that environmentalism was connected to his/her ethnic identity. As the weeks progressed, however, the women increasingly followed Kyle's lead and replicated her language about the significance of African American involvement in the environmental movement. Mrs. Jameson, a mother of three teenage sons and one of the group's most enthusiastic participants, had previously learned about environmental issues through a college course. But she had never considered the disproportionate availability of that information in minority communities. Motivated by Kyle's approach during the bible study, she told me, she 'channeled Veronica' as she helped develop a Green Team Ministry at her own church, frequently pointing out 'the historic lack of information about environmentalism in the black community'.

As Kyle encouraged the bible study women to become 'mini environmental celebrities' by embracing a movement that previously had eluded their community, she intended to overcome twenty-first-century stereotypes among liberal white communities that assume most African Americans are impoverished, plagued by violence, poorly educated, and too overwhelmed with everyday problems to care about the environment.¹¹ She simultaneously offered a challenge to white environmentalists to

11. Throughout my fieldwork I witnessed Kyle expressing frustration about these kinds of stereotypes among Faith in Place's white participants, many of whom would excuse African Americans from any obligation to protect the environment because they had too many other troubles. Several times I observed Kyle reminding Faith in Place's white staff members that African Americans are middle class too and should not be paternalistically excused from taking responsibility for their unsustainable habits.

interrogate cultural practices that made their movement unwelcoming to minorities and wanted to move beyond conversations about environmental justice that positioned minorities merely as passive environmental victims. Kyle's work with the bible study and more broadly her work at Faith in Place were driven by a sense of ethnic pride and duty as she strove to bring African Americans the opportunities and resources she suggested were widely available to white people. She was very explicit about that goal, having expressed to Faith in Place's board of directors that she was committed to 'building a generation of foot soldiers. I'm not apologetic about the fact that I'm doing this for my community. I work for my community.'

Following Kyle's lead, other bible study participants expressed desires to work as well on behalf of African Americans. The group discussed the importance of bringing both health and positive opportunities to their community, supporting black entrepreneurial efforts, and speaking out on behalf of all African Americans. But even as Kyle embraced environmentalism as a means to defy white stereotypes of African Americans as impoverished and in need of white people's help, ideas about aiding the black underclass motivated the bible study women's work. The women themselves had achieved middle-class status, but many came from working-class backgrounds, lived in close proximity to poor neighbors, and had family members who were not middle class.¹² As a homework assignment Kyle asked participants to drive through different neighborhoods and examine the various food options available for different communities, noticing the dearth of healthy options available in poor neighborhoods. By focusing conversations on issues of access to food and information in the African American community, Kyle led the women to understand themselves as working on behalf of all African Americans, often equating their problems as the problems of the poor. Even though the women already maintained relatively healthy diets, they expressed concern about their neighbors who did not. None of the women were eligible for food assistance programs, but they were thrilled to learn about local efforts making it possible for farmers markets to accept Link cards (food stamps) and planned to share this information with their neighbors.

Despite the women's connections with and concerns about African Americans across boundaries of class, the way they framed their community's problems and the corresponding solutions was inevitably shaped by their own middle-class experiences. Kyle described the

12. For more on the pervasiveness of this phenomenon among middle-class African Americans, see Patillo (2007).

challenges of helping her mother implement more costly 'just' eating practices during one trip to the grocery store. The women acknowledged that purchasing food at farmers markets was more expensive than relying on conventional or discount grocery stores, but they believed 'just' eating practices were available to everyone. One participant suggested that poor people could shop at farmers markets if they were conscientious about following the curriculum.

But another bible study participant wanted to bypass that slow process of change, suggesting that shopping at the farmers market was accessible but people had to be conscientious about how they used their food. 'It costs more', she explained, 'but because it costs more, we buy, eat, and waste less'. In their excitement about informing their neighbors that the local farmers market accepted Link cards, the women did not acknowledge other potential barriers, such as the market's limited hours (open only on Thursday mornings) and the time, knowledge, and skills required to prepare fresh, local produce.

Dishing Out Health and Soul

The bible study participants' path to environmental conversion began with a discussion of food and health in their communities. As the weeks progressed, Kyle and Walters would direct the group's attention to topics that were more explicitly 'environmental', but they began by talking about an issue that participants had already considered: the challenges of introducing healthy eating habits in their community. The women anticipated enormous challenges in trying to convince fellow parishioners to change what they ate and served to each other, pointing to complex connections between dietary preferences, especially for 'soul' food, and African American identity. Walters talked about ways that church mothers used soul food to nurture their community, such as 'the cultural practice of cooking foods like fried chicken, or gumbo with a million pounds of butter, or fried green tomatoes'.¹³ She sighed longingly as she imagined the taste of those foods on her tongue, then continued:

So there's that cultural practice of food [as] the way I say I love you, and if I don't love you I'll give you bad food, and if I do love you I'll give you good, filling comfort-y type foods, like macaroni and cheese. You have these women who come to church and bring food, and it's their way of

13. Several food theorists have written about ways that women transmit culture and show love to family and community members through food. For example, see Bower (2007).

saying I care, and I'm part of this community, and also that's their identity in this community, as someone who brings good food. And how do you go to them and say, you know, your food is kind of killing the congregation?

The concept of soul food developed along with soul music as part of Black Power ideology in the early 1960s, but the concept describes a type of 'down-home' cooking—traditionally food for the poor—that featured foods traditionally grown in Africa that had long been associated with African American culture. In the early twentieth century, members of the black bourgeoisie rejected the cuisine as they sought to counter primitivist portrayals of their culture, and soul food's significance remained contentious throughout the Black Power era (Witt 2007: 111). While some Black Power leaders rejected soul food for generating complacency and representing 'massa's leftovers', others upheld down-home cooking as central to their heritage, celebrating Hoppin' John, hushpuppies, and hoecake as characteristically black cuisine (2007: 115).

Soul food retained its ambivalent legacy among the bible study's women. During group conversations the women all seemed to embrace the cuisine, discussing the importance of maintaining a tradition of soul food even though it tended to be fattening and contributed to poor community health.¹⁴ Some followed a conciliatory approach, rethinking what was meant by 'soul' and arguing that dishes can be made healthier by tweaking the recipes. Others pointed out that much soul food was already nutritious, such as one participant's comment that 'healthy food is part of our culture too. Not just fried chicken and ham. Healthy stuff from the garden.'

In contrast to these positive public comments about soul food, however, several of the women revealed during follow-up interviews that they did not personally care for the cuisine. Mrs. Weldon, a retired social worker in her late seventies, explained:

My mother was born and raised in the South, but the South wasn't in her. So we didn't eat a lot of fried food. And I think that because she did a lot of cooking for other people, white people, who didn't eat a lot of fried food, she learned to cook it. We ate soul food, we ate beans and greens and all that kind of stuff, but she didn't fry it. So that wasn't new to me.

Mrs. Jameson, who at age thirty-seven was one of the youngest members of the group, similarly told me that she rarely ate food associated with 'soul'. She explained that her husband had been learning healthy cooking techniques from the Food Channel for several years and her

14. In this sense the women support R. Marie Griffith's contention that 'the mainstream black Christian denominations [have] settled themselves squarely on the side of soul food, an expression of black pride' (2004: 157).

family's dietary practices diverged significantly from the way she ate as a child. Other women said they already ate quite healthily and rarely consumed soul food because either they had diabetes themselves or lived with someone who did.

The women's ambivalence when it comes to soul food underscores the many functions of food beyond simply providing nutrition. Etta Madden and Martha Finch suggest that food can function '*symbolically*, as a means for representing and communicating group values; [and] *functionally*, as a primary factor in the construction of bonds within and boundaries around a community and as a means of material and ideological negotiations with the outside world' (2006: 14, italics original). Even though several of the bible study women did not personally care about soul food, it was clear that the cuisine held symbolic value, contributing an important part of their ethnic consciousness as a symbolic representation of African Americans as a group. Preparing, serving, and even discussing soul food were expressions of caring and love and functioned to unite the women with fellow African Americans.

Conversely, the women discussed how mainstream environmentalism embeds a different type of ideal cuisine that functions to exclude African Americans: vegetarianism. Reduced meat consumption often is associated with a more sustainable diet, and the chapter on food and the environment in *Just Eating?*, which describes some of the ecological harms of factory farming, encourages participants to replace some meat with alternative sources of protein. Some of the women were open to this idea, and one often brought up the example of her vegan daughter. Yet Kyle tended to steer conversations away from this possibility, tacitly equating vegetarianism with characteristically 'white' cuisine, implicitly assuming that reducing meat consumption is a simple task for white families. Most participants agreed that vegetarian meals would not be well received in their homes, and instead discussed the possibility of seeking out sustainably raised meat.

Although not a dominant strain in African American culture and history, there are historical precedents for vegetarianism among African Americans. Some within the Black Power movement embraced Elijah Muhammad's insistence on purity and restraint in dietary practices to the point of becoming vegetarian and members of the Black Hebrews embrace a vegan diet (Austin 2006: 66). Participants in the Philadelphia-based black liberation movement MOVE also maintain diets that are mostly raw and vegetarian.¹⁵ But instead of drawing from those particular examples, Kyle relied on idealized images of 'the previous generations'

15. See <http://onamove.com/>.

and their agricultural past as models for living sustainably in the present. When Walters introduced the concept of community-supported agriculture (CSA), in which individuals purchase a share in a farm, Kyle likened the system to her own childhood memories: 'We used to have a truck farmer come by the house. He had a wagon pulled by a mule, and he sold stuff by the bushel. Our parents would get so excited about green tomatoes; they'd fry and eat them right away—fried green tomatoes and shuck beans.' Whether or not soul food was important to different individuals, continuity with their ancestors and African American history certainly was. As participants became more familiar with present-day environmental practices, Kyle helped them connect those practices to the lives of their ancestors, or how things were done 'back in the day'.

Bible study conversations about food and health—issues that long had concerned the women—initiated a process of thinking about the health of the environment, an issue that had not previously commanded their attention. The *Just Eating?* curriculum offered a type of healthy, sustainable, 'environmental' cuisine that its white authors did not likely recognize as conveying any particular cultural symbolism, but when presented to a black audience, the food's cultural markers became clear. Environmentalism might bring to mind crunchy granola types who eat tofu and shop at Whole Foods, but for the bible study women this vision would not work. It was important to them that black environmentalism reflect black culture and that sustainable food retain a place for 'soul'.

Connecting Sustainability to African American History

As the bible study progressed, conversations shifted from personal health to broader discussions about food and sustainability. The *Just Eating?* unit on food and the environment asks participants to think about the Christian virtues of hope, humility, loving your neighbor, and intercession as they relate to the planet. It encourages the practice of hope in caring for the planet, humility in recognizing that humans are utterly dependent on a 'web of relationships' including animals and ecosystems, and loving one's neighbor by purchasing fair-trade items. The discussion of intercession asks participants to think of the planet as they would a sick friend and offer 'prayerful attention' to muddy rivers, monocultures, and missing farms (Schrock 2005a: 30).

Just as the bible study women thought about the importance of inflecting sustainable eating habits with elements of African American culture, they also discussed the challenges of conveying standard ideas about sustainability and the importance of establishing environmentalism's relevance within their own communities. First and foremost,

participants discussed the history of slavery in the United States. Whereas educated young white people were drawn to the resurgent organic farming movement, the group discussed that this was not an appealing goal among African American communities because farming immediately brought slavery to mind. As Walters recounted, 'I was looking through pictures of black farmers, and [my friend] said, "Are these pictures of slaves?" And I said, "No, these are farmers in the twenty-first century!" So that association of black people out in the sun working fields...are obviously pictures of slaves.' For some of the elders in the group, the disdain was even more intimate because as children they had experienced sharecropping. Like many children of farmers, they wanted to escape from the farm to the city as quickly as possible. Mrs. Scott, a retired nurse, shared her visceral childhood memories of the farm and said, 'I don't often eat blueberries because I had to pick them. I have a bad association with them.' Likewise, Mrs. Kinkaid, a church deacon in her early sixties, shared memories of backbreaking summers spent on her grandparents' farm in northeast Texas. One summer she recalled,

I promised myself that if I never saw a pea again I wouldn't care. Because you picked your food you were going to eat every day. And not only did you pick it, you sat there shucking those peas. And my sister and I made up a song: 'I'm sick of peas, peas, peas, I'm sick of peas. I don't care if ever again in life I see a pea, I'm sick of peas.'

Conversations about the ambivalence of African Americans toward the land developed into discussions about their ambivalence toward environmentalism more broadly. The women pointed out that the most publicized environmental campaigns have focused on issues that do not immediately concern African American communities. Walters recalled, 'I grew up in the nineties, when they were all about saving the whales and raising all this money to save the whales. And I'm sitting here like, there's people who are hungry; we can't go to the doctor. So there's that kind of like, *rrrrr* around all this energy and care being given for whales and not for babies'. She suggested that environmental issues were relatively new to most of the bible study participants as well, explaining,

I feel like there is a strong narrative about food and health in the black community but not about food and the environment. Not environmental practice, period. I don't feel like, in the communities I've been in, that's a story that's been told or a story that's been held up. When I see black people in environmental movements, it's kind of anomalous. It's like, 'Hi!' And then we go back to our particular groups.

Kyle changed the discourse to help the participants understand how environmental concerns can emerge organically from black culture. Having thought not only about their own health but also about the relationship between their eating habits and the health of other people, participants were prepared to expand their concern and think about the effect of their food choices on the earth. They had language to think about these issues in relation to health, justice, and the African American community as well. For example, Kyle encouraged participants to purchase fair-trade coffee, which is better for farmers and for the environment, because, 'We've been exploited and we don't want to exploit others'.

Through these discussions the women came to realize that they actually had positive memories of working the land, but these were not the types of stories often shared in their communities. Moving past her negative memories of peas, Mrs. Kinkaid affectionately recalled other experiences on her grandparents' farm: 'Our favorite thing was when Big Mama would take us into her personal garden where she grew watermelons and peas and all kinds of stuff. And you'd get a watermelon and just sit there and break it open on the ground and stick your face in it. We enjoyed that.' Mrs. Scott fondly recollected her childhood growing up on a farm: 'I have memories of my family. We used to miss school to pick. But we were never hungry. We canned everything, even meat.' Walters was removed from her family's farming history by two generations—her great-grandfather was a sharecropper and her grandmother loved to garden—but she remembered that her grandmother 'had this real love affair with the soil and just growing things and watching things grow. She had this bathtub in her backyard, and she'd grow roses in it. They were the best roses on the block'. The women seemed to enjoy sharing their stories with each other. Smiling at Mrs. Kinkaid's recollections about her grandmother's farm, Mrs. Scott exclaimed, 'I knew there was a reason I liked you, farm girl!'

While discussing their positive memories of working the land, participants considered reasons why these types of stories were not often recalled and celebrated in their families and communities. Their grueling memories of farming life offered potent reminders that farming can be arduous and boring work, putting lie to romanticism about organic farming and back-to-the-land movements. The elders in the group understood why their children and grandchildren would not want to return to a farming life and generally agreed that parents in their community wanted to see their children progress to careers away from the land. As the youngest member of the group, Walters had inherited those expectations from her own parents: 'I didn't know that my

grandmother grew all their food until my dad told me recently. We just never talked about it. It was just something that wasn't that valuable.' Others talked about an implicit hierarchy that privileges office work and education over agriculture, not to mention the unspoken understanding that Walters pointed out: 'You don't want to spend too much time in the sun because you don't want to get too dark'.

Through the bible study the women began to rethink their relationships to the environment. Walters emphasized the importance of 'addressing the value of working the land and also lifting up those metanarratives of black people in the soil who enjoyed it'. Other women explained how they were already trying to do that by passing on their memories through experiences for their children and grandchildren. Mrs. Kinkaid said she enjoyed planting flowers when she was growing up at an apartment complex in New Orleans, and when she moved to Chicago and had children, she also gardened with them and took them to visit nearby farms. These negotiations held up in their discussions of other environmental activities as well. Through the bible study some participants came to identify activities they had always done as 'environmental' even though they had never seen them that way and certainly had never thought of themselves as environmentalists. Mrs. Weldon had recycled ever since curbside pickup became available in her neighbourhood, and Mrs. Jameson used to do vermicomposting in her house as part of a women's empowerment project. But in their minds they were just taking out the trash and earning money, not protecting the earth. Through conversations in the bible study these women began to see their activities in a new light, gradually embracing environmentalism as a movement that was relevant to them.

The women's environmental identities became much more concrete when they took a field trip to the Englewood Farmers Market, a short drive from the church. Although several of the women were aware that this weekly market took place on the south side, none had ever considered attending. After visiting the market as a group, however, the women discussed plans to return every week. Especially impressed by the presence of so many black farmers and entrepreneurs, Mrs. Weldon declared after the field trip, 'To go and support one of our own—that felt good! It's not as easy as it is to go to the closest store, but it felt good.' For Mrs. Scott, the experience of talking to farmers and tasting their freshly harvested produce was vastly different from her usual habits of shopping at large grocery stores. Visiting the market reminded her of her childhood when she spent summers picking and canning tubs of green beans. Back then, she reflected, 'We ate local all the time'.

As the women continued to reflect on the experience, Kyle steered the conversation to focus on connections between sustainable practices and supporting the black community. She told them about one of the vendors at the market, Growing Home, whose south-side urban farms offered job training and transitional employment programs for individuals with histories of incarceration, substance abuse, and homelessness. Marking the power of supporting such a program, Kyle recounted that when she purchased her vegetables from Growing Home's stand that morning, the saleswoman, a former incarcerated, did not provide her with enough change. After an initial reaction of anger, Kyle said, she took a moment to reflect and decided it was an honest mistake. 'I went to the market today to look at the face of Christ', she declared. 'What I realized looking at the face of that woman [made me keep] thinking about all the faces of women being abused... But even the beater is someone's child. What happened to him?' Without directly bringing up the issue of class status, Kyle's story connected a sustainable practice—shopping at the farmers market—to a sacred opportunity to empower the black underclass. Walters added that Growing Home offered a CSA, and the women in the group could support them by becoming shareholders. 'This is a consciousness issue for African Americans in our community', Kyle piped in. 'Some people go in it together and buy a basket. It's like the truck farmer we used to have come by the house when they sold stuff by the bushel.'

The following week, Kyle asked the women to reflect on how the class had affected them so far and how they might inspire similar changes for future *Just Eating?* participants. 'Now I appreciate my friend in Calumet City who grows her own vegetables and cooks them', Mrs. Harris offered. Mrs. Kinkaid offered a more thorough response: 'I've become aware of where my food comes from and problems that people have with food issues. Food is connected to everyone else in the world. With the circumstances of being born here [in the U.S.] we have all this stuff, but that's not the case for everyone.' To convey their experiences to others, the women discussed how the Afrocentric edition of *Just Eating?* could help African Americans reconnect with the land in positive ways. Many offered their own family photographs of farming ancestors for use in the new edition of the book, although these artifacts were hard to find because most portraits portrayed families in their Sunday best and not with their farming tools. By sharing their photographs, participants wanted to express that farming is something to celebrate. The women recognized that growing food was an attractive possibility only to a few, but they wanted to encourage community members to take advantage of emerging opportunities in organic farming and the new green economy.

In contrast to the widespread idea that it is progress to get away from the land, the women in the bible study discussed ways that it is empowering and joyful for African Americans to grow their own food. A 'faith in action' step proposed for the Afrocentric edition encourages participants to 'take time this week to think about how the reality of slavery for our ancestors influences your relationship with and ideas about agriculture... Reflect on stories from family, friends, and community about Black people enjoying the soil and agricultural work' (Schrock 2005b: 33).

As she worked to help the women embrace environmental identities, Kyle drew on a discourse of respectability and opportunity as she emphasized the vast resources available for those with environmental knowledge and skills. 'Green is where it's at!', she frequently exclaimed, speaking about the 'eco-divide' akin to the digital divide that left African Americans behind in the last decade.¹⁶ Describing this issue, Kyle recalled her lack of understanding back in the 1990s when people talked about sending emails and conducting research on the Internet. Participants recalled similar experiences of their own and agreed that when it came to the environment, their community must not make the same mistake of missing out on knowledge essential for competing in the new economy. 'We know why we got away from farming, like we didn't want to pick blueberries', Kyle said. 'But with the new generation we have a chance to be farmers and great entrepreneurs. We know why the land became hostile to us, but we can't let people steal that from us.' When Mrs. Jameson's teenage son joined the group for a potluck, Kyle preached to him, 'Green is the new IBM, the new Silicon Valley. If it doesn't have green in front of it, it's not good. Our young people can't afford not to be connected.'

As Kyle encouraged participants to become conversant with environmental concepts such as carbon footprints, climate change, and soil erosion—knowledge sets that she suggested are ingrained in white kids from an early age—she was encouraging them to become conversant in a language and way of being that would signify membership in the middle class. In terms of quantifiable factors of success, environmental literacy provides a form of cultural capital, offering a set of soft skills that can affect success on the job market (Jackson 2001: 4). Acculturated into the dominant class, white youth (and here she uses a specific

16. Environmental activist Van Jones, the founder and former president of Green For All and former special advisor for Green Jobs at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, writes and talks extensively about the eco-divide (see, e.g., Jones 2009; Finrock 2008).

segment of affluent white youth as representative) are exposed to environmental culture throughout daily life, facilitating their access to educational, financial, and occupational opportunities that rely on a base knowledge, awareness, and understanding of environmental issues. Without a base understanding of climate change, energy conservation, and other environmental issues, Kyle worried, black youth would be not be able to access future opportunities in the green economy. With the support of Faith in Place, Kyle brought a set of financial resources and provided experiences that she hoped would help south- and west-side churches seek out these kinds of opportunities on their own.

Communicating Black Environmentalism

Changing the thoughts and behaviors of African Americans was one element of Kyle's project, but equally significant was her aspiration to convey to white audiences that those changes had taken place. As I accompanied Kyle to numerous different sites across Chicago, I observed the fluidity of her language as she adapted her message to convey different ideas to different audiences. On the south side Kyle worked to instill environmental literacy and values among black participants and hoped that they would introduce these changes to the others in their community. Her goal was for the African American community to 'go green' and become knowledgeable about environmental issues and practices. Even though most of the African Americans she worked with already were middle class, she wanted them to engage in classed behaviors such as organic gardening and shopping at farmers markets that would signify that status to others.

Outside of the bible study Kyle frequently updated Faith in Place's white participants on the expansive environmental work that was taking place on the south side. By conveying a sense of African Americans' widespread activism surrounding the very issues that concerned environmentalists on Chicago's north side and suburbs, Kyle defied monolithic images of the south side as a marginalized community where residents were solely victims of environmental problems and had too many of their own difficulties to care about the long-term health of the environment. In the process, Kyle addressed her community's problems from her own class position, never acknowledging the possibility that poor people might indeed feel that they have more pressing concerns than their cultural identities or the environment. African American studies scholars have found that rising social class affects the ideological positions through which the black middle class understands and addresses collective social problems, and many have identified Afrocentrism as

a distinctively middle-class approach (Austin 2006; Moses 1998). According to sociologist Algernon Austin, Afrocentrism's goal 'was to have black Americans function as respectable, middle-class Americans who also had African cultural identities' (2006: 170). That seems to align with Kyle's approach to developing a self-consciously black environmentalism, because she understood environmental involvement as a means to overcome white stereotypes of black people as poor and oppressed. If respectable white Americans cared about the environment, respectable black Americans cared about the environment too, but for reasons growing from African and African American culture such as traditions of 'mother care', celebrations of 'ideal meals' of collard greens and grits, and remembrances of the African American history of slavery, sharecropping, and community gatherings around food. Dissatisfied with the tendency of mainstream environmentalism to privilege the experiences and priorities of white people, Kyle positioned herself as an authoritative leader who could best understand and advance the interests of the entire black community. She privileged an idealized history of African American connections to food and the land and positioned environmentalism as a solution to the problems she perceived from her own social position.

Life After Just Eating?

The last day of the bible study featured a comfort-food potluck to which participants brought their favorite foods. As they shared containers of chicken gumbo, spaghetti and meatballs, Hoppin' John, and Caprese salad, the women reflected on what they had learned through the bible study and committed to continuing particular practices. They talked about being more mindful when they ate, purchasing fair-trade coffee, helping their communities eat more healthily, and shopping at the farmers market. As individuals shared their commitments, the group responded by chanting, 'May God bless your offering with a rich and bountiful harvest'. Kyle also spoke about other opportunities through various organizations to become more involved in the environmental movement. She again encouraged participants to become 'mini environmental celebrities', underscoring the importance of an African American presence at environmental events in order to demonstrate that this is their issue too.

For half of the women who regularly participated in the group, the end of the bible study seemed to be the apex of their nascent environmental involvement, because they never again showed up at Faith in

Place events.¹⁷ But for four of the eight regular group members, the bible study functioned as an important springboard that led to participation in other environmental activities, both with Faith in Place and through participants' own initiatives. Among those who consented to follow-up interviews, all reported lifestyle changes they had made as a result of the bible study, such as increases in organic food consumption, recycling, and composting. For Mrs. Kinkaid and Mrs. Weldon, conversations about pesticides and soil erosion had lasting influence. Mrs. Weldon told me about her new preference for eating organic produce. She qualified that her concerns were primarily related to her own health, but she recognized they were also related to the health of the planet. She explained, 'I think about the stuff I'm putting in my body first, but the pesticides that go into the ground [affect] the planet. So it all rolls over into one.' Mrs. Kinkaid told me that the bible study helped her gain a respect for the land and a concern about soil erosion: 'When you discover that the soil has only about one third of the nutrients that it did even when I was a girl, I say, "Okay, this isn't going to work". So what can I do differently to help get at least something a little better for my family? I have to nourish the soil we have at home.'

In addition to individual changes, the women became involved with broader environmental initiatives. At Kyle's urging, Mrs. Jameson joined the Chicago Conservation Corps, a city program to recruit and train environmental leaders. Mrs. Weldon joined Faith in Place's contingent at 'Environmental Lobby Day' at the Illinois state capitol, and both women collaborated to create a Green Team Ministry at their church. In the following year the Green Team established a church recycling center, switched to compact fluorescent light bulbs, helped their congregation participate in a weatherization program, and started a community garden. They encouraged their entire congregation to 'go green' by including monthly bulletin inserts about environmental issues and urging them to participate in the church's recycling and gardening programs.

Mrs. Kinkaid, Mrs. Jameson, and Walters also expressed the importance of the bible study for changing how they thought about their own relationships to environmentalism. All three gave examples of new

17. On the last day of the bible study I asked all eight of the regular participants for permission to contact them for follow-up interviews. Four of the women balked at my request, while four of them agreed. The women who did not want me to contact them were the women who did not continue participating with Faith in Place. On the last day of the bible study these women explained that they had busy schedules and were unable to commit to anything else.

environmental practices they had embraced as a result of bible study conversations, but they also explained how participating in the group provided a new context for understanding things they had always done. After describing her lifelong enjoyment of gardening, collecting cans to recycle, and 'playing in the dirt', Mrs. Kinkaid told me, 'The conversation [about the environment] has always been there, but we just didn't use those words'. Mrs. Jameson told me that *Just Eating?* 'was like a jumping point. It made me more aware and made me look at faith and environmentalism in a new way and how they're interrelated.' Although she had previously done vermicomposting in her kitchen, purchased organic foods, and at different stages in her life had made an effort to recycle, she 'never really thought about it as environmentalism. That's the strange thing.'

From my conversations with Walters I had learned that this shift in thinking was precisely her goal for the group, because she saw the bible study as

kind of giving people a space to think about these things and to spend some time getting language around it... That was definitely one our goals: to address that dichotomy that we put ourselves in and to give permission to say, 'I like getting dirty, I like getting in the sun, I like being black in the summertime'.

While the bible study might not have resulted in significant changes in behavior or political consciousness, it did help participants learn to frame their concerns and their identities in ways that cohere with contemporary environmental thought.

For Kyle, the dedicated bible-study alumnae also served as successful models that she could hold up as she recruited other African Americans to Faith in Place. She invited the group to attend the next Faith in Place workshop as a *Just Eating?* reunion, and she made sure to introduce these honored guests to the otherwise white audience at the beginning of the program. Since 2009 Kyle has developed additional programming for African Americans, including summer gardening internships for youth, weatherization projects, and 'Monarchs, Migration, Birds and Me', a program designed to help African Americans understand their own life stories as connected to a broader ecological whole. Through these and related efforts, by 2014 African Americans accounted for 19% of Faith in Place's supporters.

Conclusion

An optimistic glance at this fieldwork might focus on the 'successful greening' of Christianity at this religious nonprofit run by seminary-trained leaders conversant in Protestant theologies of environmentalism. These bible study women were inspired, one might be tempted to conclude, to 'go green' based primarily on their ecumenical dialogues. Perhaps the eco-friendly ideas percolating among religious intellectuals can and in this case have trickled to the regular churchgoers.

Such a conclusion, however, would fail to appreciate the messy process through which these regular churchgoers came to embrace their new environmental identities and the implications of that process for their environmental behaviors. It also would ignore the 50 percent of the bible study participants who chose not to continue being involved with Faith in Place.¹⁸ It is certainly worth noting that since my fieldwork concluded, more than 800 additional African Americans have become active members of Faith in Place. Yet even in light of this more recent success, the data prevents me from making broad generalizations with regard to the 'greening of religion' hypothesis because it is not clear that 'religion' *per se* was among the most influential variables that motivated these women to shift slightly towards more eco-friendly lifestyles. Rather, this case study would seem to support Bron Taylor's theorization that 'environmental concern expressed by religious actors is a *reflection* of the culture in which the religious actors are situated, not the *result* of the religion's ethical ideals' (2011: 255, italics original). It is true that the women learned about *Just Eating?* and the ecological principles that it conveyed through their church networks. They surely would not have joined a bible study if they were not at least somewhat interested in learning from Christian, faith-based interpretations of the bible. After the women became involved with the group, however, the bible's centrality quickly faded. The group engaged in *lectio divina* exercises at the beginning of most meetings, and they periodically made reference to Christian virtues, such as hospitality, hope, humility, and gratitude that were highlighted in the *Just Eating?* guide. But much more frequently than talking about protecting the earth as Christians, the women talked about protecting the earth as African Americans. With her speeches about becoming environmental celebrities and gaining knowledge and

18. The consent protocol that I built into the design of my research prevented me from pursuing follow-up interviews with the women who dropped out of the programming, so unfortunately I was not able to gather additional data on their individual rationales for leaving.

skills necessary for the twenty-first century, Kyle highlighted the cultural cachet and economic opportunities that came along with 'going green'. While recruitment for the *Just Eating?* group relied on religious networks, ideas about respectability and opportunity for African Americans came to dominate bible study conversations much more than principles directly related to the bible.

By cultivating concern about climate change, pesticide use, soil erosion, and community health, the bible study helped inculcate concern about the environment in its own right. Even more important for Kyle, however, were the ways in which 'going green' would advance the interests of African American communities. Kyle aligned environmental literacy with opportunity and middle-class respectability, and she saw her efforts to diversify the mainstream environmental movement as a political act. Targeting primarily middle-class congregations in her efforts, Kyle did not set out to change behaviors or attitudes radically. Rather, she was more interested in changing identities. Through her work at Faith in Place, then, Kyle encouraged African Americans to become more 'environmental' by reshaping the ethos of Faith in Place's 'environmentalist' curricula to reflect the (not-explicitly religious) social, economic, and political concerns of this group of Chicago African Americans. Kyle's innovative shift called for recycling bins, money-saving home weatherization supplies, and community gardens. Both literally and metaphorically, then, bringing African Americans into Chicago's interreligious environmentalist fold required more meat on the table.

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