

Article

The Chaplain-Led Climate Sanctuary—A Mixed-Methods Study into the Work That Reconnects

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Abstract

How can chaplaincy respond to the existential concerns of people who face climate change in their daily life as activists? We address this question by researching a chaplain-led intervention in the Netherlands called the “Climate Sanctuary”, based on The Work That Reconnects. The study comprised a mixed-methods pre- and post-survey. Seventy-three participants took part in the study. Before the intervention, participants indicated that they were mostly concerned about the effects of, and the lack of urgency in taking measures against, climate change. This was accompanied by emotions of anger/outrage, powerlessness, despair, grief and anxiety. After the intervention, participants mentioned that the Climate Sanctuary provided them with sources of strength. Moreover, they were better able to deal with their emotions: there was a statistically significant decrease in anger/outrage ($Z = -2.012$, $p = 0.044$), powerlessness ($Z = -2.247$, $p = 0.025$) and insecurity ($Z = -2.044$, $p = 0.041$). Thirdly, they found peers and, fourthly, time for reflection. The results show that chaplains can play a role regarding climate change in providing a sanctuary for people in which they are acknowledged in their suffering and can explore and deepen their relationship with a climate-changed world, build community and experience renewed hope as the ability to go on.

Keywords: chaplaincy; spiritual care; climate change; climate-related emotions; sanctuary; intervention; The Work That Reconnects; movement chaplaincy



Academic Editor: Mary Rute Gomes Esperandio

Received: 16 March 2026

Revised: 17 June 2026

Accepted: 19 June 2026

Published: 1 July 2026

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1. Introduction

Do chaplains have a role to play around climate change? If so, what might this role look like? In this article, we would like to move a step closer to answering these two questions. The context prompting these questions is the widespread and rapid climate change that is occurring around the globe ([IPCC 2023](https://www.ipcc.ch/)). According to the sixth report of the International Panel on Climate Change, this human-caused change is leading to weather and climate extremes that induce losses and damage to nature and people, disproportionately affecting communities that have contributed the least to this change ([IPCC 2023](https://www.ipcc.ch/)).

We are not the first to ask these questions. A few scholars have already considered the relationship between chaplaincy/pastoral/spiritual care and climate change ([Pihkala 2022a](#), p. 192; [2025](#), pp. 69–96; [Calder and Morgan 2016](#), pp. 16–25; [Doehring and Cowen 2025](#), pp. 104–27; [LaMothe 2019](#), pp. 421–36; [Helsel 2018](#), pp. 22–33). Helsel, LaMothe and

McCarroll point to the widespread and systemic suffering that climate change causes—a suffering that chaplains will surely encounter in their practice, particularly in their care for the marginalized (McCarroll 2020, pp. 29–46; LaMothe 2019, pp. 421–36; Helsel 2018, pp. 22–33). More specifically, Pihkala discusses the interconnection of climate change and religion/spirituality on several levels: ecological losses have a direct physical impact on spirituality and religion through, for example, the loss of significant places; the disturbance of spiritual/religious practices by environmental changes; and the deep spiritual/religious crises that people may experience because of climate-related emotions such as grief, anxiety, guilt, shame and anger (Pihkala 2025, pp. 69–96). Furthermore, The BTS Center (2025) has committed itself to developing practices and applied research into spiritual leadership for chaplains in a climate-changed world. Of particular relevance is their “Climate Conscious Chaplaincy” initiative, consisting of learning communities, conversational circles and lectures to deepen chaplains’ understanding of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual impacts of the climate crisis and to explore how chaplains can address those.

In this article, we will focus on climate-related emotions. The emerging fields of climate psychology, psychiatry, public health and theology indicate that climate-related emotions are an increasing reality in many people’s lives (McCarroll 2020, pp. 29–46; Grau 2025, pp. 1–17; Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, pp. 275–81). In this article, we will understand climate-related emotions in line with Ratcliffe’s “existential feelings”, as bodily feelings that amount to ways of relating to the world as a whole (Ratcliffe 2020, pp. 250–61). We identify climate-related emotions as existential emotions because climate change engenders concerns around the existential themes of relatedness, death, meaning, authenticity, freedom, responsibility, spatiality and temporality (Budziszewska and Jonsson 2021, p. 0022167821993243). It disrupts our sense of coherence, connectedness and continuity and can thereby evoke a loss of meaning, faith, hope, purpose and belonging (Passmore et al. 2023, pp. 138–53; Pihkala 2020, p. 7836).

In Pihkala’s (2022b, p. 738154) taxonomy of climate-related emotions, he lists the following subdivisions: (1) surprise-related emotions, such as amazement, disappointment, confusion, shock and feeling isolated; (2) threat-related emotions, such as anxiety, powerlessness, feeling overwhelmed and panic; (3) sadness-related emotions, such as grief, solastalgia, longing and feeling lonely; (4) strong anxiety-related emotions and strong depression-related emotions that refer to mental health disturbances; (5) emotions related to guilt and shame; (6) emotions related to indignation; (7) disgust-related emotions; (8) anger-related emotions; (9) envy-related emotions; (10) feelings of hostility; and (11) many kinds of positive emotions, including motivation, determination, empowerment, joy, pride, pleasure, gratitude, hope and togetherness. Some climate-related emotions have been studied more than others. The climate-related emotions that thus far receive the most attention are sadness/grief, fear/worry/anxiety, guilt/shame and hope/empowerment (idem). Less attention has been given to anger or frustration (Grau 2025, pp. 1–17) and feelings of togetherness and belonging (Pihkala 2022b, p. 738154).

Climate-related emotions are referred to as *common human experiences*, apt within the context of climate change and a constituting force for action (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, pp. 275–81; Antadze 2020, pp. 21–26). Scholars agree that climate-related emotions are grave and painful, but they are not in themselves pathological, although they may lead to health disturbances (Pihkala 2025, pp. 1–28). Since climate change has been established as fundamentally a moral issue, climate-related emotions have been discussed as moral emotions, meaning that they are aroused in relation to people’s moral frameworks (Antadze 2020, pp. 21–26). Various authors point out that there is a need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between climate-related emotions and their moral dimensions and recognition of the moral distress or even moral injury that accompanies the disconnect that

people experience between their moral frameworks and their actions (Banwell and Eggert 2024, p. 100283; Henritze et al. 2023, pp. e238–41; Weintrobe 2020, pp. 351–62). Banwell and Eggert (2024, p. 100283) propose the concept of “environmental moral distress” to refer to the moral distress that individuals experience in response to climate change, expressed through a range of climate-related emotions. Weintrobe (2020, pp. 351–62) describes how feelings of ecological distress are entangled in a neoliberal “culture of uncare”. She refers to the current economic system of free-market capitalism with minimal government intervention and connects this to a mindset of exceptionalism and entitlement. In her work, she points out how feelings of complicity and collusion with destructive political and economic systems can cause deep feelings of moral injury: the violation of “what’s right”. She describes this as

“the helplessness of feeling caught up in a vast machine that prevents one from acting with care and conscience; the collapse of one’s inner ideals; feeling one’s own experience and sense of reality is brushed aside and does not count; guilt at one’s actions within this framework.” (Weintrobe 2021, p. 241)

To address environmental moral distress, Banwell and Eggert (2024, p. 100283) argue that we need approaches that do justice to the relational, contextual and political dimensions of these emotions. The latter in particular should not be forgotten, as climate-related emotions are inevitably embedded in power relations (Grau 2025, pp. 1–17). Approaches should include supporting people with identifying their moral standpoints and fostering their moral agency and collective action. This prevents climate-related emotions from being individualized, pathologized and decontextualized and potentially helps to prevent moral injury (Banwell and Eggert 2024, p. 100283).

Following from an understanding of climate-related emotions as existential and moral emotions, we would argue that care for people with climate-related emotions does not only belong to the realm of psychological care but also to that of chaplaincy care. In the secular context of the Netherlands, we speak about chaplains in terms of professionals who *support moral processes of (re)orientation in life*—an attempt to speak about chaplaincy in inclusive language that embraces both the diverse worldview backgrounds of chaplains as well as their clients (Schuhmann et al. 2025). People are necessarily immersed in moral questions about what a good life means for them, and this search happens across physical, relational and sociocultural dimensions: as embodied beings in a material world, entangled with others and rooted in culture (Schuhmann et al. 2025). Dutch chaplains offer support around life questions at the micro level (individuals, groups), meso level (organizations) and macro level (policymakers). They do this within institutions such as the military, healthcare, penitentiaries and law enforcement, but also as self-employed entrepreneurs in primary and community care. LaMothe poignantly poses the following life question in relation to climate change: “What does hope mean in the face of extinction?” (LaMothe 2021, p. 55). Or, in other words, what good life can we still imagine if larger horizons of meaning are being extinguished (McCarroll 2020, pp. 29–46)? So, in line with the abovementioned studies and the definition of chaplaincy, our answer to the first question, “do chaplains have a role to play around climate change?”, would be affirmative: yes, chaplains have a role to play in climate change, as climate-related emotions bear a moral and existential dimension.

This brings us to our second question: what might this role look like? Pihkala (2022a, p. 192) asks

“Will providers of pastoral care show care and recognition to people who feel eco-anxiety? What kind of methods will they use, and what ways forward will they offer people?”. (p. 193)

In this article, we will look deeper into a method that tries to offer a way forward, namely a chaplain-led intervention called the Climate Sanctuary. Various authors stress the need for dialogical practices and collective rituals that support people in processing climate-related emotions (Verlie 2021; Aspey et al. 2023)—spaces that enable people to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), in which disenfranchised and marginalized kinds of grief associated with climate change can be acknowledged, expressed, explored and channeled in constructive ways (Craps 2023, pp. 69–77); spaces that nourish people’s sense of possibility and promote a sense of collectiveness (Johnstone et al. 2023, pp. 101–10). The BTS Center (2025) proposes to call such spaces “refugia”—a biological term describing places of shelter where life endures in times of crisis, such as a volcanic eruption, fire or a stressed climate. In her book, *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth*, Rienstra (2022) applies this concept to human culture and faith, calling upon churches and people of faith to become “a people of refugia”:

“It calls us to look for the seed of life where we are, concentrate on protecting and nurturing a few good things, let what is good and beautiful grow and connect and spread. [...] As the etymology of the term implies, refugia are places of refuge. They are places to find shelter—but only for a time. More importantly, refugia are places to begin, places where the tender and honoring work of reconstruction and renewal takes root. In human terms, refugia operate as microcountercultures where we endure, yes, but also where we prepare for new ways of living and growing.” (p. 5)

1.1. The Climate Sanctuary

In recent years, the Dutch Humanist Association (Humanistisch Verbond) has developed and organized the “Climate Sanctuary” (Klimaatvrijplaats)—a group intervention for climate activists and others who experience the emotional and existential burden of engaging with climate change. On their website, they address for whom this sanctuary is intended:

“The world is on fire, yet politicians are failing to act. Targets are not being met, and political leaders offer empty words. As a result, more and more people—especially young people who want to stop the climate crisis—feel isolated in their struggle. They become desperate, burned out, and despondent. Their sense of meaning and purpose is threatened.” (Humanistisch Verbond 2025)

The Climate Sanctuary is a year-long program, designed to help participants to “mentally recharge”, “find ways to stay hopeful” and “find a balance between concerns about the climate crisis and connection with the here and now” (Humanistisch Verbond). In four free sessions, spread throughout the year, participants are invited to explore and share climate-related emotions such as anger, powerlessness, despair and grief in a supportive group setting facilitated by chaplains and other meaning-making professionals¹.

The Climate Sanctuary is primarily inspired by Joanna Macy’s Work That Reconnects (WTR), an experiential groupwork methodology developed from the 1970s onwards that combines systems thinking, deep ecology and Buddhist philosophy (Macy and Johnstone 2012). Macy was one of the pioneers in recognizing that ecological destruction can evoke profound emotional, existential and spiritual responses; she captured climate-related emotions such as anxiety, grief and despair under the term “pain for the world” (Macy and Brown 2014). Rather than approaching emotions as signs of dysfunction, the WTR understands them as meaningful responses to ecological losses and injustices. The overall aim of the methodology is to strengthen people’s capacity to face disturbing realities while remaining engaged in life-sustaining action.

Central to the WTR is “The Spiral”, a process consisting of four interconnected stages. These stages are (1) coming from gratitude—grounding oneself in appreciation to build resilience; (2) honoring our pain for the world—processing emotions like grief and despair for the planet to transform them into compassion; (3) seeing with new eyes—shifting perspectives to recognize our deep, ecological interconnection with all of life; (4) going forth—taking inspired, practical action based on these insights (Macy and Johnstone 2012, p. 9). In this stage, participants reflect on how they wish to contribute to the wellbeing of people, communities and ecosystems and how they can sustain engagement in the face of uncertainty and ecological disruption.

The Spiral is supported by a variety of experiential practices, including contemplative exercises, active listening, movement, guided meditations, nature connection, games and rituals such as the Truth Mandala and the Bowl of Tears (Macy and Brown 2014). At the same time, the WTR offers participants a number of broader narratives and concepts through which climate-related experiences can be understood. The most important concepts include “Business as Usual”, referring to dominant patterns of economic growth and consumption that contribute to ecological degradation, and “The Great Unraveling”, naming the ongoing social, political and ecological disruptions associated with climate change. Contrasting concepts are “The Great Turning”, which is about “the epochal transition from an industrial society committed to economic growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world” (Macy and Johnstone 2012, p. 5), and “Active Hope”, which understands hope not as optimism about future outcomes but as a practice of engagement and value-driven action (Macy and Johnstone 2012, pp. 2–3). During the sessions, facilitators introduce participants to these concepts and to texts from Macy’s work. In this way, they function as interpretive frameworks through which participants can reflect on and make sense of their climate-related emotions.

While the Climate Sanctuary has adopted the Spiral as its overarching structure, it has not directly implemented the WTR. Rather, it has adapted the WTR and integrated additional sources of inspiration and methods. The four sessions are connected to the symbolism of the four seasons (Gras and Boschman 2020); participants engage in contemplative dialogs (Nowak 2020), and facilitators draw on concepts from transactional analysis, particularly the Drama Triangle (Berne 2011; Karpman 2014). As such, the WTR and other elements are integrated with one another to form a chaplaincy intervention focused on moral processes of (re)orientation in life: What is good care for the world to me, to us? Where do I find renewed hope, while at the same time honoring my pain for the world? Facilitators support participants in their search for meaning around climate change by helping them to recognize the existential and moral dimensions of their climate-related emotions and to connect them to broader worldview perspectives and practices.

1.2. Research Questions

To assess whether this chaplain-led intervention was indeed helpful for people facing climate-related emotions, we studied the following research questions: (1) What are the respondents’ concerns regarding climate change? (2) How effective has the Climate Sanctuary been in addressing their concerns? We hoped that answering these questions would not only provide insights into the role of chaplains around climate change, but also increase the understanding of how chaplains in secularizing contexts—in this case, in the Netherlands—may support people with a variety of worldview backgrounds.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Mixed-Methods Approach, Research Paradigm and Positionality Statement

Pihkala (2022b) makes the important remark that a growing body of research indicates that social norms and psychosocial factors may prevent either respondents or researchers from noticing difficult emotions such as climate-related emotions. In this study, we relied on people's self-recognition skills, so we decided to conduct the study with the help of a mixed-methods approach. This means that the survey included both exploratory open-ended qualitative questions and quantitative questions—based on available theories—to hopefully prompt awareness about less apparent emotions. The research paradigm that framed the mixed-methods approach was constructivist/interpretivist: we understood the perceptions of the respondents regarding the quantitative and qualitative questions as subjective constructions of reality (Schwandt 1994). All authors are academically educated (MA and PhD) as chaplains or as psychologists/psychotherapists. Some work in academia and others in the field. Their backgrounds are white, cisgender (male and female), 35+ years old and Humanist, atheist or unaffiliated. According to the demographic data, there were no great sociocultural differences between the researchers and the respondents. Regarding the topic of the study, the respondents were deeply involved in activism around climate change, while two out of the five authors are engaged in volunteering in environmental NGOs and climate activism. In this study, the authors tried to immerse themselves in the lived experience of the respondents and to juxtapose this with previous research. They are aware that this is achieved from a position of privilege, as they are all middle-class residents of a highly climate-resilient country.

2.2. Respondents

Surveys were distributed between February 2023 and July 2025. Participants of the Climate Sanctuary were 18 years or older. They were screened by the chaplains for mental health disorders following a protocol in a telephone interview. If their climate-related emotions affected their functioning in their daily lives too much—that is, they had long-standing difficulties in dealing with their own thoughts and emotions—they were referred to professional assistance from a chaplain, psychologist or psychiatrist.

2.3. Procedure

Respondents received a survey invitation before the start of the program and after the last session of the Climate Sanctuary. The online survey was created and administered via Qualtrics (Provo, UT, USA).

For the qualitative part, the pre-survey included the open-ended questions “What currently concerns you the most regarding climate change?” and “What do you hope the Climate Sanctuary will bring you?”. The post-survey contained questions about whether they found what they had hoped for in the Climate Sanctuary and the changes in thoughts, feelings and/or behaviors that respondents possibly experienced as a result of the intervention.

The quantitative part comprised of a list of themes that respondents had to score on a Likert scale from not at all to very much (1–5). For scores of 4 or 5, respondents were asked to write an explanatory note. The question of the first list read “To what extent do you currently struggle with the following existential themes in relation to climate change?” Respondents could also add extra themes. Themes were based on a qualitative study by Rehling (2022, pp. 472–85) into existential concerns regarding climate change. In everyday Dutch, it is more common to talk about existential themes than about existential emotions, feelings or concerns, so we chose the word “themes” for the questions. In the post-survey, the respondents were asked to score the list again. Finally, respondents were asked sociodemographic questions about their age, educational level and worldview.

2.4. Analysis

For the analysis for the qualitative part of the survey, two authors (A.D. and M.R.) thematically analyzed (Braun and Clarke 2006, pp. 77–101) the open-ended questions in ATLAS.ti (Version 22). The results were discussed with the research team, after which a second analysis round was conducted.

The analysis of the quantitative part was performed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) by A.D. and M.R. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean rating and the standard deviation. Because of the skewness of the data, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the pre and post results. The threshold for the p-value was set at 0.05. The calculations were checked by a methodologist. Both the qualitative and quantitative results were discussed with one of the facilitators of the Climate Sanctuary to confirm that the results matched how the facilitator had experienced the intervention.

2.5. Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the University of Humanistic Studies, file number 2025-03. Respondents were informed about the study, including their rights as participants, at the start of the survey. They were granted the possibility to ask questions. All participants signed an informed consent form.

3. Results

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 73 respondents are reported in Table 1. The sample (average age 48.8 years; 51% with a university degree) considered themselves mostly unaffiliated (23.8%), Humanist (14.3%), atheist (8.3%), agnostic (4.8%), Christian (14.3%) and Buddhist (11.9%). Compared to the religious landscape of the general Dutch population, which comprises 55.4% religiously unaffiliated individuals and 34.2% Christians (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) n.d.), the sample was relatively more secular. This is not surprising given that the intervention was offered by the Humanist League, an organization likely to attract more secular participants. Thirty-five respondents filled out the post-survey. This group was slightly less affiliated than the pre-group, with fewer Christians as well as Buddhists.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics (N, %).

		Pre-Survey N = 73	Post-Survey N = 33 ^d
Age in years, mean (SD, range)		48.8 (12.6, 25–77)	51.3 (12.2, 27–77)
Educational level	High school or vocational education	5 (6.8)	1 (3)
	Higher vocational education	17 (23.3)	11 (33.3)
	University degree	51 (69.9)	21 (63.6)
Worldview ^a	Unaffiliated ^b	20 (23.8)	7 (17.1)
	Humanist	12 (14.3)	6 (14.6)
	Christian	12 (14.3)	3 (7.3)
	(Affinity with) Buddhist	10 (11.9)	3 (7.3)
	Atheist	7 (8.3)	5 (12.2)
	Agnostic	4 (4.8)	4 (9.6)
	Other	19 (22.6) ^c	13 (31.7) ^e

^a Total is more than 100 percent because respondents sometimes indicated more than one worldview. ^b Unaffiliated includes “none” and “irrelevant”. ^c Gaianist, Hinduist, Taoist, shamanist, Marxist, intersectional socialist, eco-/post-humanist, feminist, spiritual, value-oriented (e.g., helping the people around you, leaving a better world behind, radical equality), connected with nature, coincidence. ^d Thirty-five respondents filled out the post-survey; demographics were only available for N = 33. ^e Shamanist, socialist, spiritual, apathist, holist, eclectic, philosophical, value-oriented (e.g., leaving a better world behind, living in balance with nature, respecting the rights of living beings), connected with nature, paganist.

In the following, we will first report on the results of the first part of the research question: What are the respondents' concerns regarding climate change? Then, we will focus on a response to the second part of the question: How effective has the Climate Sanctuary been in addressing the respondents' concerns?

3.1. What Are the Respondents' Concerns Regarding Climate Change?

Respondents were mostly concerned about the different effects related to climate change ($N = 31$). This included worries about global warming, biodiversity and future societal chaos. A respondent commented,

"I am afraid of global warming and its disastrous consequences. We will have more refugees, more anger and fear, wars because of shortages, and I don't know what else".

Respondents mentioned almost as many concerns about the lack of urgency of governments and individuals in taking measures against climate change ($N = 30$). A respondent worried about "the rapid pace of climate change in contrast with the slow pace of the social changes needed to halt it".

In third place, respondents spoke about inequality—the disproportionate ways that climate change impacts different populations, with disadvantaged groups often bearing the brunt ($N = 14$):

"The connection between climate change and other social struggles, the internal struggles between the white middle class, for whom climate change is mainly about smart solutions, and the more marginalized groups, for whom the fight against climate change is much more about survival, loss of work, racism, etc."

Other frequently mentioned concerns pertained to the economic system as a cause of climate change ($N = 11$). Respondents voiced concerns about the influence of multinational corporations and the fossil industry, as well as about overconsumption and meat consumption: "The injustice that people in other parts of the world suffer as a result of our Western consumption; I find our faith in the economy downright aggressive". Furthermore, respondents expressed concerns about the future for themselves and their loved ones ($N = 11$): "The worrying situation I am leaving behind for my children and grandchildren". Moreover, respondents raised questions around their roles as activists and the effectiveness of their activism ($N = 10$): "My activism: is this the best way for me to deal with this? Does it give me hope, or does it cause more stress?".

Finally, respondents expressed concerns related to their worldviews ($N = 6$) and the health of the planet ($N = 6$). A respondent wrote in relation to people's worldviews, "The holistic aspect of everything: the low level of connection between people—with themselves, each other, and nature/all life on earth—in the deeply rooted system in which we live". Regarding the health of the planet, one respondent commented, "The fact that the Earth and its animal and plant life are rapidly deteriorating due to human activity". See Table 2 for all concerns and their sub-concerns.

In relation to the abovementioned concerns, the respondents struggled with the following climate-related emotions, shown in Table 3. Per theme, an exemplary quote by a respondent is displayed. Respondents experienced considerable anger/outrage ($N = 69$, $\mu = 4.1$) and powerlessness ($N = 68$, $\mu = 4.0$) before the start of the Climate Sanctuary intervention. They also expressed some despair ($N = 70$, $\mu = 3.5$), grief ($N = 69$, $\mu = 3.5$), anxiety ($N = 69$, $\mu = 3.4$), insecurity ($N = 69$, $\mu = 3.3$), meaninglessness ($N = 68$, $\mu = 3.1$) and loneliness ($N = 69$, $\mu = 3.1$). Interestingly, respondents wrote down several positive themes in the open-ended section, such as compassion, joy, hope and connection. In their quotes, respondents noted that climate emotions were often interconnected—for example, "For me,

despair is linked to powerlessness. The gap between what is needed and where we are is so great, that despair regularly strikes”.

Table 2. Respondents’ concerns regarding climate change.

Concern	Sub-Concern	N	N
			31
Effects of climate change	Global warming	5	
	Biodiversity	5	
	Societal chaos	5	
	Tipping points	3	
	Polarization	2	
	Finitude of the world	2	
	Sea levels	2	
	Pollution	2	
	War	1	
	Fear and anger	1	
	Fires	1	
	Severe weather	1	
	Refugees	1	
			30
Lack of urgency of governments and individuals in taking measures against climate change	Urgency	24	
	System change	4	
	Defeatism	1	
Inequality of climate change			14
			11
Economic system	Multinationals	5	
	Capitalism	3	
	Fossil industry	2	
	Meat intake	1	
	Criminal aspect	1	
Future of loved ones			11
Activism			10
Worldview			6
Planet wellbeing			6

Table 3. Climate-related emotions.

Theme (N = Pre, Post)	Exemplary Quote Pre-Survey	Pre-Survey, Mean (SD, Range)	Post-Survey, Mean (SD, Range)	Difference Pre–Post, p-Value (Z)
Anger/outrage (N = 69, 30)	I find the attitude towards the climate of most people, CEOs of polluting companies and politicians in particular, appalling	4.1 (0.8, 2–5)	3.6 (0.9, 1–5)	0.044 (–2.012)
Powerlessness (N = 68, 32)	What does it matter what I do?	4.0 (0.8, 2–5)	3.4 (1.0, 1–5)	0.025 (–2.247)
Despair (N = 70, 32)	No one is listening	3.5 (1.0, 1–5)	3.2 (1.0, 1–5)	0.251 (–1.149)

Table 3. Cont.

Theme (N = Pre, Post)	Exemplary Quote Pre-Survey	Pre-Survey, Mean (SD, Range)	Post-Survey, Mean (SD, Range)	Difference Pre–Post, p-Value (Z)
Grief (N = 69, 32)	It's saying goodbye to what has already been lost, but I am also mourning the world of today	3.5 (1.1, 1–5)	3.2 (0.9, 1–4)	0.272 (–1.098)
Anxiety (N = 69, 33)	I am very afraid of what my children will go through	3.4 (1.0, 1–5)	3.2 (1.0, 1–5)	0.351 (–0.932)
Insecurity (N = 69, 32)	What should I do for the future? For example, would my hypothetical child want to be born?	3.3 (0.9, 1–5)	3.0 (0.9, 1–5)	0.041 (–2.044)
Meaninglessness (N = 68, 30)	I'm nothing more than a drop in the ocean. It's all pointless. I often feel that way	3.1 (1.1, 1–5)	2.7 (1.2, 1–4)	0.767 (–0.296)
Loneliness (N = 69, 32)	I'm feeling alone among family and friends. Everyone is living their own lives, and I'm on the barricades	3.1 (1.0, 1–5)	2.6 (0.9, 1–4)	0.063 (–1.859)
Guilt (N = 69, 31)	You always do too little. And living perfectly isn't easy	2.9 (0.9, 1–5)	2.7 (1.2, 1–5)	0.186 (–1.324)
Finiteness/death (N = 70, 32)	Not only my death, but especially that of others, and the finiteness of our planet's habitability	2.9 (1.2, 1–5)	2.6 (1.1, 1–5)	0.177 (–1.349)
Shame (N = 70, 32)	Towards future generations that didn't take action sooner. . . We knew, didn't we?	2.6 (1.1, 1–5)	2.4 (0.9, 1–5)	0.278 (–1.085)
Other (N = 52, 22)		3.4 (1.3, 1–5) ^a	3.0 (1.3, 1–5) ^b	0.256 (–1.137)

^a Discouragement (3×), compassion (2×), inner blockage, tiredness, numbness, being overwhelmed, bewilderment, worry, self-hatred, alienation, responsibility, life, joy, hope, connection. ^b Cynicism about the roles of companies, frustration, zooming out, responsibility, wonder, hope, inspiration, life, joy.

3.2. How Effective Has the Climate Sanctuary Been in Addressing the Respondents' Concerns?

We will now turn to the second part of the research question: How effective has the Climate Sanctuary been in addressing the respondents' concerns? This includes responses to the survey questions “What did you hope the Climate Sanctuary would bring you?”, “Has this been achieved?”, “Did you experience a change in thoughts, feelings and/or behaviors as a result of the intervention?” and “To what extent do you still currently struggle with existential themes in relation to climate?”.

Respondents' hopes are shown in Table 4. Overall, we found that the majority of the respondents (N = 26) indicated that the Climate Sanctuary brought what they had hoped for. Some respondents remarked that their hopes were partially met (N = 7), while, for two other respondents, they were not fully met (N = 2) because they did not feel better or had not found the hoped-for calmness in the body after the intervention. Respondents' satisfaction with the intervention from 1 to 10 was, on average, 8.1 (SD = 1.1; range 6–10).

When we look more closely at the respondents' hopes, we can see that, firstly, they hoped to find sources of strength to be able to go on (N = 112). After the intervention, they reported experiencing more hope, peace and energy. They described being able to continue activism, to bring more focus to their activities, to recharge and to take better care of themselves:

“The Active Hope method explicitly focuses on gratitude and grief. Gratitude serves to recharge your batteries. I was no longer able to recharge in nature because of sad thoughts. I now know that I can still be grateful and that I can relax more, even though there is still so much to do. . . In short: I have a better understanding of what self-care is and what thoughts go with it”.

Table 4. Respondents' hopes regarding the Climate Sanctuary.

Hope	Subtheme	N	N	Exemplary Quote
Sources of strength			112	
	Hope	17		A hopeful vision
	Peace	11		More peace and tranquility with the imperfect situation we find ourselves in
	Energy	11		Inspiration and energy to keep going
	Able to continue activism	9		To find ways to continue taking action, despite my feelings of despair
	Inspiration	9		Inspiring stories from fellow supporters
	Concrete tools	8		Concrete guidelines for what activities I can undertake
	Connection	8		Connection, with the world as it is, with my inner world, with others
	Strength	8		Strength to keep going and remain a pleasant person
	Knowledge	5		Food for thought!
	Perspective	4		A perspective for action, new insight that allows me to feel meaningful again
	Balance	3		Balance
	Resilience	2		Building resilience
	Meaning	2		Renewed meaning
	Courage	2		Courage
	Self-acceptance	2		Perhaps some acceptance for my shortcomings
	Support	2		Support
	Other ^a	9		
Support with climate-related emotions			40	
	Tools to process emotions	15		Tools for processing climate grief and depression
	Express emotions	11		That I can unburden my heart
	Feel emotions	6		An opportunity to fully feel and express my grief
	Acknowledge emotions	4		Recognition of my feelings
	Accept emotions	3		Acceptance of my feelings
Peers	Bear my emotions	1		Learning to deal with my feelings of despair, learning to bear them better
			33	A warm bath of recognition among like-minded people, for once not being the climate activist/only vegan/extreme leftist in the group
Reflection			7	Insight into how I and others can better deal with the situation and the accompanying emotional rollercoaster

^a Trust, determination, positivity, self-confidence, compassion, change, humor, motivation, wisdom.

Secondly, respondents hoped that the Climate Sanctuary would help them to deal with their climate-related emotions ($N = 40$). After the intervention, they reported that they understood the value of emotions better; that emotions can help to find direction; that paying attention to them and sharing them is important to stay whole; and that they can bear them:

“Another change is that I feel less angry, more accepting, and... more okay with the fact that I can only do my part. Grieving together is so healing.”

“I did feel the space again to give the (somewhat neglected and hidden) pain a place, which allowed my feelings to flow more freely again.”

“Yes, the despair is real, stays with me, and at the same time is bearable.”

The quantitative data support the qualitative findings. In Table 3, we can see that respondents experienced a reduction for all climate-related emotions based on their mean scores. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicates that the Climate Sanctuary elicited a statistically significant change in their experiences of anger/outrage ($Z = -2.012, p = 0.044$), powerlessness ($Z = -2.247, p = 0.025$) and insecurity ($Z = -2.044, p = 0.041$).

Thirdly, the respondents hoped to find peers ($N = 33$). After the intervention, they reported feeling less alone and more connected and supported, although this was not always fully accomplished:

“That what I feel is shared. That I am not alone.”

“I feel enormously supported by the fact that there is so much grief, even among ‘people who can do more than I can’.”

“I thought it was good to [...] be able to share everything, but sometimes it remained superficial because we didn’t have enough time.”

Finally, respondents hoped to find a space for some (self-)reflection ($N = 7$). After the intervention, they described having more insight into themselves, such as into what bothered them or what they were looking for in the future:

“I have also learned to no longer speak in the first person plural (We see no chance of effective measures... We’re making a mess of it). There is no ‘we’ that I am part of. I am witnessing a crime and I am taking responsibility for stopping it.”

4. Discussion

In this study, we explored the question of to what extent the chaplain-led Climate Sanctuary intervention is an effective response to the concerns of people who face climate change in their daily lives as activists. Participants reported that the Climate Sanctuary provided them with sources of strength, that it helped them to better deal with their climate-related emotions (which was accompanied by a statistically significant decrease in anger/outrage, powerlessness and insecurity) that they found peers and space for (self-)reflection. These are the first promising indications that the intervention was helpful. In the following, we will discuss the three major outcomes in a broader context and in relation to chaplaincy.

4.1. Sources of Strength

With regard to sources of strength, finding “hope” was, for many participants, the motivation to join the Climate Sanctuary. How can we understand this “hope” that they seek and find in the intervention? If we take a closer look at the participants’ responses, we can see that hope involves the desire to be able to carry on, to find a new perspective or some positivity that helps them to keep going in their pursuit of climate justice. This resonates with the work of Head (2016), who argues that we should decouple hope from the emotion of optimism. Based on interviews with climate scientists, she conceptualizes hope as an embodied practice, as the ability to “keep on going”: “hope is a risky and complex process of possibility that carries painful emotions; it is something to be practiced rather than felt” (p. i). Johnstone (Johnstone et al. 2023, pp. 101–10) describes how participants of the WTR develop a different relationship with the concept of hope: “it became not so much something they had, but something they did” (p. 102). Hope in this sense was not so much about hopefulness, but “a living energy of engagement expressed by taking steps in a

hoped-for direction” (p. 103). The Climate Sanctuary intervention seems to have provided the participants with such an understanding of hope as a practice that can exist alongside painful emotions.

4.2. *Engaging with Climate-Related Emotions*

If we look at the second outcome—participants’ ability to better deal with their climate-related emotions—a helpful way to understand this process might be the concepts of “emotional reflexivity” (Hamilton 2022, p. 786631), “emotional resiliency” (Davenport 2024, pp. 31–41) and “spiritual reflexivity” (Doehring and Cowen 2025, pp. 104–27). In a previous study into the WTR, participants described that the intervention invited them to develop emotional reflexivity in three ways: (1) through the movement of emotions into consciousness; (2) through a changed relationship with painful emotions; and (3) through the transformation of emotions (Hamilton 2022, p. 786631). Participants in that study became aware of their emotions, developed the capacity to be with and bear their emotions and/or could even see how they could turn their emotions into a powerful force. We can discern these three levels also in the comments of the participants of the Climate Sanctuary. As helpful outcomes of the intervention, they describe that they are now able to face their emotions, are no longer fully possessed by them and can see their value. They seemed to have developed more emotional resilience, defined by Davenport (2024, pp. 31–41) as “the practice of cultivating the ability to remain present, open-minded, and empathetic in the face of increasing stress” (p. 39). She coined the word “toggling” for the process needed to build this emotional resiliency in the face of climate change:

“We need to be truth-tellers when it comes to climate education. But we also need to use the tools to work with our natural emotional reactions. Toggling refers to intentionally moving back and forth between difficult climate truths and emotional self-regulation. Practicing our ability to move between the two grows and strengthens our emotional resiliency.” (p. 39)

Davenport proposes to use emotional regulation tools for this process of toggling, such as breathing exercises, walking in nature and journaling—exercises that foster a sense of grounding and embodiment. These tools are included in the Climate Sanctuary and might have contributed to the participants’ ability to better deal with their climate-related emotions.

Chaplaincy scholars Doehring and Cowen (2025, pp. 104–27) propose a method of spiritual reflexivity for engaging with climate distress that includes sharing climate-related emotions and reflexively searching for personally meaningful values, beliefs and practices. Spiritual reflexivity toward climate distress is then fostered through

1. Identifying one’s stress-generated orientation to witnessing climate crises (stress-based emotions, moral foundations, values, beliefs and ways of coping);
2. Using self-reflexivity to identify how social advantages and disadvantages shape one’s experience of witnessing climate stress;
3. Identifying one’s intentional moral foundations, values, beliefs and ways of coping, generated by spiritual practices for experiencing goodness and self-compassion.

They call this “a goodness-based spiritual orientation to witnessing climate crises”, as this orienting system contains some of the same moral foundations, values and beliefs as one’s stress-generated orientation but is more likely to be integrated into a coherent “whole” that allows for spiritual ambiguity, spiritual openness and spiritual complexity. In the Climate Sanctuary, participants loosely reflected on their values, beliefs and ways of coping. They were offered new perspectives on (their role in) climate change and spiritual practices around self-compassion within the framework of the WTR. Next to emotional reflexivity and resiliency, spiritual reflexivity might also have supported the participants in dealing with their climate-related emotions. One question that arises here for future

research is to what extent the process of meaning-making was open-ended or guided. Were the participants free to reflect on and choose their own moral foundations, or was the content primarily filled in by the WTR? What difference would a more open-ended process of spiritual reflexivity have made for their meaning-making?

One of the highest-rated climate-related emotions was “anger/outrage”—a less studied emotion in previous research. Participants of the Climate Sanctuary related their anger to concerns about the lack of urgency of governments and individuals in taking measures against climate change, to questions about inequality regarding climate change and to the current economic system. According to Verlie (2024, pp. 1601–19), anger is a symptom of lived experiences of climate injustice, often accompanied by feelings of abandonment, indignation, betrayal and cynicism. She argues that we must understand climate distress as an issue of affective violence and injustice, deliberately caused by failing governments and the fossil fuel industry. Similarly, philosopher Albrecht (2019) conceptualizes climate anger as “terrafurie” or “earth anger”: a form of protective anger that arises when people recognize the self-destructive trajectory of industrial society while simultaneously feeling unable to halt the ongoing ecocide. Importantly, Albrecht describes terrafurie not as an aggressive emotion but as a form of anger directed towards protecting life and challenging the social and political structures that perpetuate environmental destruction. Climate anger can therefore be understood not only as a symptom of distress but also as an expression of care, moral concern and commitment to ecological justice. Recent scholarship has further emphasized the transformative potential of anger. Pihkala (2024a, 2024b, 2025) argues that climate anger should not simply be reduced or suppressed but constructively engaged with, as it can serve as an important source of energy for climate action. Multiple authors that are deepening our understanding of climate anger (Bergman 2023; Grau 2025; Pihkala 2024a; Thresher 2025) draw on Cherry’s (2021) concept of Lordean rage—named after the activist and author Audre Lorde—to describe constructive forms of anger that are oriented toward justice, solidarity and positive social transformation rather than hostility or retribution. Cherry conceptualizes Lordean rage as a form of transformative anger: anger that is neither destructive nor all-consuming but capable of generating insight, solidarity and social change (Cherry 2021, p. 24). Such anger can coexist productively with other emotions, including sadness, compassion, empathy, love, hope and even joy (Cherry 2021, p. 170). At the same time, Thresher (2025, pp. 201–23) cautions that anger alone is insufficient for sustaining climate engagement. She argues that hope is closely linked to the belief that one’s actions can have a meaningful impact and that “hope, optimism, and anger are inextricably linked” (Thresher 2025, p. 211). Drawing on Cherry, she suggests that transformational anger is most productive when experienced alongside more positive emotions rather than in isolation. From this perspective, the decrease in anger observed in the Climate Sanctuary should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in moral concern or commitment to climate action. Rather, it may reflect a reduction in more overwhelming forms of anger, particularly given the simultaneous increase in hope among participants. The Climate Sanctuary’s contribution may therefore not be to eliminate anger but to contextualize, integrate and potentially transform anger within a broader emotional repertoire that includes hope, connection and a renewed sense of agency.

Finally, we would like to discuss the systemic dimension of emotions. Importantly, Verlie points out that “rather than limiting consideration to how best to help individuals cope with their painful personal experiences”, approaches that address climate-related emotions should address “the restructuring of social systems as its primary goal” (Verlie 2024, p. 1614). At first sight, the Climate Sanctuary appears to focus primarily on individual wellbeing through a group-based intervention aimed at helping participants to process and cope with climate-related emotions. Taking Verlie’s critique seriously therefore raises an

important question: would the intervention be strengthened by a more explicit focus on power, privilege, collective action and systemic change? To answer this question, a closer examination of how social transformation and power are conceptualized within the intervention itself would be helpful. While the Climate Sanctuary does not explicitly engage participants in political organizing or critical analyses of power and privilege, it draws heavily on Macy's WTR. One could consider the WTR a systemic framework that seeks to situate personal experiences within broader social, ecological and historical processes. Rather than positioning climate distress as an individual problem, Macy understands emotions such as anger, powerlessness, despair and grief as responses to living within socioeconomic systems that contribute to ecological destruction while appearing resistant to change. Central to Macy's approach is the distinction between the narratives Business as Usual and The Great Turning. This distinction offers participants an alternative narrative through which to understand both their emotions and their agency. Feelings of frustration, grief or powerlessness are not interpreted as signs of personal inadequacy but as understandable responses to the social, political and economic realities of the climate crisis. At the same time, the narrative of The Great Turning challenges the apparent inevitability of Business as Usual by inviting participants to see themselves as part of a broader movement of social and ecological transformation in which countless visible and invisible actions contribute to change. Within this framework, power is not primarily understood as domination or control ("power over") but as a relational and collective capacity ("power with"), emerging through cooperation, mutual support and synergistic action (Macy and Johnstone 2012, pp. 105–16). Such an understanding offers an alternative conception of agency, one that emphasizes participation in wider networks of change rather than individual efficacy alone. Furthermore, Macy understands the work to be done as part of a multi-generational journey: according to her, it took seven generations to get into trouble (since the industrial revolution), and it will take seven generations before we have accomplished The Great Turning towards a livable, flourishing and just society. Seen from this perspective, the Climate Sanctuary does not simply help participants to cope with climate emotions. It also provides an interpretive framework through which these emotions can be understood as responses to specific social and political realities, while simultaneously cultivating alternative understandings of power, agency, time and societal transformation. In this sense, the intervention engages with not only the emotional consequences of climate change but also the narratives through which participants understand their place within a changing world.

Does this narrative resource in the Climate Sanctuary sufficiently address the structural dimensions of climate distress identified by authors such as Verlie? While Macy's framework situates personal emotions within broader processes of social and ecological transformation, the intervention primarily operates at the level of personal and collective meaning-making rather than through explicit political analysis, advocacy or collective action. This raises an important question for chaplaincy and spiritual care more broadly: to what extent should interventions aimed at supporting climate-related distress focus on individual and communal resilience, and to what extent should they actively engage questions of power, privilege and systemic change? Later in this discussion, we will introduce "movement chaplaincy" as a potential practice that integrates more explicit reflection on these structural dimensions/social and political roots of climate distress.

4.3. Finding Peers

With regard to the third outcome of "finding peers", this is of relevance in relation to the experiences of loneliness in the midst of the climate crisis that people reported pre-intervention. Organizing this intervention in the form of groupwork proved to be an effective choice. Davenport (2024, pp. 31–41) and Gillespie (2019) also stress the importance

of groupwork around climate/emotions. As fears, sorrows and inspirations are shared in a safe and non-judgmental space, witnessed by others, people generally feel less isolated and overwhelmed by them. Gillespie (2019) notes, “The validation of what we feel along with empathic support makes what seem unbearable, bearable—and then actionable” (p. 44). Pihkala (2024b, pp. 123–32) points out yet another function of groupwork, as a group can be a space where people move from darker to lighter feelings:

“Engaging with dark emotions can move participants toward a space where counterpart emotions are also present: a space of meaningfulness, joy and connection through shared work for the planet, courage in the face of finitude, and healthy pride for making an effort.” (p. 130)

Not all participants experienced the Climate Sanctuary in this way. Some remarked that the program was so full of activities that there was not enough time to get to know each other well. This could be an important point of attention for a future edition of the Climate Sanctuary.

4.4. *The Interconnection Between Hope, Climate-Related Emotions and Peers*

Are the three outcomes that we have discussed connected to each other? For example, does an increased experience of hope influence participants’ emotional and spiritual reflexivity and resiliency, and vice versa? And can the same be said about the relationship with finding peers? This was not the initial focus of this study, but, based on the empirical data, we can provide some preliminary indications for future research. We understood from the participants that sources of strength, emotional processing and finding peers were closely interconnected processes. Participants did not report finding hope by overcoming or avoiding difficult climate emotions. Rather, hope appeared to emerge through sharing experiences of anger, powerlessness, grief and despair with others who recognized and validated these experiences. Doebling and Cowen’s (2025, pp. 104–27) understanding of spiritual care is as a process in which people share moral and spiritual anguish (“spiritual dwelling”) while simultaneously exploring meaningful values, beliefs and practices (“spiritual seeking”). According to them, such processes can foster moments of hope, particularly when they occur within trustworthy communities and are supported by communal and embodied spiritual practices. McCarroll (2025) indicates that acknowledging and sharing grief in community can itself become an “act of hope”. Similarly, (ecological) grief scholar Weller (2015) emphasizes that grief is not merely an individual experience but “an intensely interior process that can only be navigated in the presence of community” (p. 116). Participants’ descriptions of collective grieving and emotional recognition/validation suggest that the Climate Sanctuary functioned as such a communal space. In this regard, ecological grief may not only express loss but also generate connection and solidarity. As philosopher Butler has argued, mourning possesses a “we-creating power” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017, p. 12), enabling people to discover forms of belonging precisely through shared vulnerability and the acknowledgement of loss.

4.5. *The Climate Sanctuary as a Chaplaincy Intervention*

We would finally like to discuss to what extent the Climate Sanctuary can be understood as a chaplaincy intervention or even a Humanist chaplaincy intervention. An important aspect of the Climate Sanctuary is its function as a meaning-making intervention. While participants were invited to express, share and reflect upon their climate-related emotions, the intervention also provided interpretive frameworks through which these emotions could be understood and situated. In this respect, the Climate Sanctuary appears to engage not only emotional processes but also existential and moral processes of orientation.

Drawing on Macy's WTR, the intervention introduces participants to a set of narratives and concepts that offer broader interpretive contexts for the understanding of ecological distress. Rather than seeking primarily to alleviate climate-related emotions, they are affirmed in the Climate Sanctuary in their significance and reframed as meaningful responses to ecological disruption and injustice. They are emotions that need to be "honored". Explicitly addressed are narratives such as the aforementioned Business as Usual, The Great Unraveling, The Great Turning and Active Hope. These narratives provide a lens through which to look to the challenges of our time and invite participants to situate their personal experiences within larger social, political and ecological processes. Similarly, Active Hope helps to reframe hope as a practice of value-based engagement rather than optimism regarding future outcomes.

Other important concepts are "seeing with new eyes" and "widening circles", which address the interconnectedness of life (Macy and Johnstone 2012, p. 247). These concepts situate climate-related emotions within a relational understanding of selfhood, emphasizing connections with other people, future generations and the wider community of life. This meaning-making dimension may help to illuminate participants' reports of increased hope, connectedness and sustained engagement, alongside reductions in feelings of anger, powerlessness and insecurity. The Climate Sanctuary thus appears to function not only as a setting for emotional processing but also as a space for existential and moral reorientation in relation to climate change. The findings suggest that an important contribution may lie not only in supporting emotional wellbeing but also in providing symbolic and interpretive resources through which experiences of ecological distress can be understood and integrated.

Another angle by which to look at this intervention is through the practice of "movement chaplaincy". This emerging practice within chaplaincy in the United States is explicitly understood in connection with societal change. In movement chaplaincy, chaplains offer support to people engaged in social justice movements: people who face and fight oppression and injustices (Wolff 2023, p. 11; Ernst and Krinks 2017; Adams 2023, pp. 203–20). Movement chaplaincy can be understood as collective, critical and inclusive spiritual care (Adams 2023, pp. 203–20) that makes use of social-emotional tools, spiritual practices, sacred texts and physical comfort to conjoin individual healing with creating a more just world (Ernst and Krinks 2017). Wolff (2023, p. 11) argues that movement chaplaincy befits these times of rising inequalities, oppressive politics and ecological upheaval:

"Chaplaincy is most needed at the 'borders' and transitions: at times and in places when the traditional rules of making sense of our experiences and narratives do not apply anymore, and we have not found new rules yet." (p. 18)

She describes how movement chaplains create "other time" and "other space" within social movements; this interrupts the routine of activist engagement, makes space for other narratives and voices, such as disappointment and estrangement, and therefore allows for new perspectives (p. 19). This "other time" and "other space" are grounded in a structural power analysis and critique. The Climate Sanctuary contains elements of this pioneering form of chaplaincy, such as how movement chaplains guide activists in finding a "balance":

"The act of striving toward a better and more just future is balanced with the experience of a prioritization of the 'here and now'. The realization that the work and the commitment of activism matter: the repetition, the disappointment, and that even when they do not yield results, they are inscribed in a greater reality that strives toward solidarity and justice. This is not simply a turn toward 'positive thinking' or toxic optimism that insists that things 'are not that bad' or are 'part of some greater plan'; instead, it is a radical acceptance of a 'dark night', and the

unjustifiable reality of suffering and death—and, at the same time, a ‘reclaiming’ of life and hope amidst them.” (p. 21)

To further develop the Climate Sanctuary intervention, it might be worthwhile to incorporate more elements from movement chaplaincy. This might address what some participants felt was missing: finding peers with whom to continue their climate actions on a systemic level. With regard to the question of whether the Climate Sanctuary is a Humanist intervention, we would say that, even though the intervention was developed by the Dutch Humanist League, it draws from a variety of traditions outside of what is usually called Humanism, including Buddhism and transactional analysis. In the WTR, Buddhist values can be recognized in the focus on compassion and its recognition of the interconnectedness of the wellbeing of all life forms. Foundational to this is the Buddhist practice of “Ecosattva”, as conceptualized by Macy as a practice that is motivated by a wish to save ecosystems—maintaining all life—from destruction (Macy 2009; Cairns and Pihkala 2024). Humanism has often been associated with and criticized for embracing anthropocentric perspectives and neglecting the environment, which further complicates the idea of understanding the Climate Sanctuary as a typically Humanist intervention. On the other hand, the intervention reflects notions of transcendence and hope, which refer to life on Earth—striving for social justice, striving for a livable world for all living beings and for future generations—which aligns with Humanist notions of spirituality (Schuhmann et al. 2025). In the study, we saw that the Climate Sanctuary was helpful for people with various worldview backgrounds, not only Humanists. We think that the intervention could also be led by chaplains from a variety of different worldview backgrounds, as long as they are comfortable with embracing and combining different worldview traditions and are drawn to “earthly” notions of transcendence. The Climate Sanctuary may thus be seen as a “postsecular” chaplaincy intervention that can be applied in secularizing contexts, where many people do not neatly fit within one specific worldview tradition.

4.6. Limitations

This study had some limitations. First, we relied on the narratives of the participants and facilitators in answering our research questions. This gave us a first glimpse of the effectiveness of the intervention. However, to open the “black box” of the intervention—that is, to obtain insight into exactly which elements worked for the participants and why—additional observation methods would have been useful. This can be a focus for future research. Second, our sample was a relatively unaffiliated and highly educated group. This limits the generalizability of our findings. Some participants noted that the intervention was too “erudite”, or too much focused on emotions, so, for future study, the intervention might need some alterations to appeal to a more diverse audience. Finally, there were no great sociocultural differences between the researchers and the respondents with respect to educational level and worldview, which illustrates that the research group was also limited in diversity. This might have had implications for the understanding of the results, such as a false consensus effect and confirmation bias. There might have been interpretations of the findings that have been overlooked.

5. Conclusions

This study into the chaplain-led Climate Sanctuary intervention shows promising indications that chaplains may have an important role to play in relation to climate change by supporting people around their climate-related emotions. The study shows initial results regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. Participants found (new) sources of strength, such as hope, peace and the energy to keep going. They were better able to deal with their emotions, with a statistically significant decrease in anger/outrage, powerlessness and

insecurity. They learned to become aware of their emotions, bear their painful emotions and constructively engage their emotions towards a force for action. They also learned to contextualize their personal experiences within broader social, ecological and historical narratives. Moreover, they found peers with whom they could share their experiences and a communal space of shared vulnerability and grief, but also joy and inspiration. Finally, they found a space for reflection about their personal ways forward. Although the intervention was offered by the Humanist League, by Humanist chaplains/meaning-making specialists, we can see that the intervention was helpful for people with various worldview backgrounds. Because the intervention combines different worldview traditions, we can imagine that chaplains with different worldview backgrounds would be comfortable leading this intervention, as long as they are drawn to “earthly” notions of transcendence. The Climate Sanctuary may thus be seen as a “postsecular” chaplaincy intervention that contributes to the meaning-making of people in a climate-changed world. At the same time, the content of the intervention raises questions that extend beyond the scope of the present study. Future research could investigate more closely how participants engage with the interpretive frameworks offered within the intervention; to what extent they adopt, modify or contest these frameworks; and how processes of personal meaning-making interact with the broader worldview assumptions embedded in the WTR. Furthermore, the extent to which the Climate Sanctuary takes the systemic dimension of climate change into account—by, for example, deconstructing social and political oppression—and whether this is what the participants are looking for may also be an important question for further research. Finally, further research can deepen the knowledge of the existential crisis related to activism and activism burnout beyond emotional exhaustion. This includes the interrelatedness of questions of meaning, responsibility, hope and meaningful action.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.D., E.N., M.R., C.A. and C.S.; methodology, A.D. and C.S.; software, A.D. and M.R.; validation, A.D., E.N., M.R., C.A. and C.S.; formal analysis, A.D. and M.R.; investigation, A.D. and M.R.; resources, A.D.; data curation, A.D. and M.R.; writing—original draft preparation, A.D., E.N. and M.R.; writing—review and editing, C.A. and C.S.; visualization, A.D.; supervision, A.D.; project administration, A.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Humanistic Studies (Approval date: 30 January 2025; Approval code: 2025-03).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank all respondents for giving their time and effort to advance science. We also wish to thank the facilitators of the Climate Sanctuary, particularly Lotte Huijing, for offering us this research opportunity. Finally, we would like to thank methodologist Annemiek Schilpzand for her assistance with the quantitative analysis.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Note

- ¹ Facilitators had obtained a Master’s degree from the University of Humanistic Studies, which prepares students to become chaplains or “meaning-making specialists”.

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