



Assembly Resourcing Unit

19 For the Whole Creation

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) To adopt the following statement, “For the Whole Creation”.

For the Whole Creation

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Uniting Church in Australia adopts this renewed statement on climate change recognising the growing urgency for significant action on this issue and heeding the clamour of voices across the world from people living with the impacts of climate change and fearing the future.
- 1.2 This Statement recognises there is a diversity of theological reflection, lived experience, policy positions and actions that draw people across the life of the Uniting Church into a deeper understanding of climate change and continuing responsible care of the earth.
- 1.3 This statement recognises the imperative for the Uniting Church to embody its prophetic role in the public sphere, acknowledging our relationship and responsibility within and with God’s good creation. In making this statement, the Uniting Church also calls upon its members to stand with vulnerable people affected by climate change.

2. Coming to Our Senses¹

- 2.1 The Uniting Church’s commitment to the well-being of the environment arises out of its belief that God is the Creator of the world in which we live and move and have our being. This ‘groaning creation’ is God’s ‘good’ creation. Through its discerning of Scripture, the church acknowledges the gospel of creation: all things were made in, through and for Christ². The Church further confesses with the whole Christian church that the Holy Spirit is the giver and source of life.
- 2.2 The Uniting Church believes that God calls us into a particular relationship with the rest of creation, a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God³.
- 2.3 The Basis of Union expresses this hope and situates it at the very heart of the church’s mission:

“God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church’s call is to serve that end.”⁴

¹ This phrase finds its basis in the story of the Prodigal Son who after his sojourn away squandering his inheritance “comes to his senses” and returns home. The phrase has close associations with ecological conversion and the notion of “awakening” and “seeing in new ways with new eyes

² Colossians (1: 15-20)

³ *Statement to the Nation*, Inaugural Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia, 1977

⁴ *Basis of Union Revised* (1992 edition), paragraph 3, Uniting Church in Australia

- 2.4 The world in which we find ourselves is at great risk. The Earth has been adversely affected by human beings. Across the world, people are already feeling the disastrous impacts of climate change. The climate is changing. Sea levels are rising. Coral reefs are dying. Extreme weather is more frequent and more severe. The case is now being made that we – that is, the Earth and all its life systems - have left behind the age of the Holocene⁵ during which our cultures and faiths have flourished; we are now entering the Anthropocene⁶, an epoch for which there is no precedent.
- 2.5 There is a present imperative to recognise that many of our neighbours in the Pacific, Asia and Africa are suffering the effects of climate change caused by the irresponsible use of our God-given resources. Climate change impacts the world's most vulnerable people first, those who have contributed the least to the problem.
- 2.6 The well-being of creation in a time of climate change falls within an overriding concern for the public witness of faith. The apostle Paul advised the Galatians to “do good to all” (6:10). Jesus bade us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Our faith is not just for those who happen to follow Christ. It is expressed in and for the world and all creation in the service of the ‘kingdom’ of God.
- 2.7 It has become increasingly clear that dominant forms of the Christian tradition have been complicit in the abuse of creation.⁷ Often Christianity has held to the belief that the world is given to use as we please. It is here for our use. Its value comes from us for we are made in the image of God: we have been called to go forth and multiply and exercise dominion and authority over the rest of creation.
- 2.8 And so, “we have lived out a doctrine of the domination of nature by accepting and engaging in practices that have failed to safeguard the integrity of creation”⁸. We have supported systems and structures that exploit the natural environment in the service of what we thought was good and sometimes for human greed. Changes have now been made to the created order, the Earth system, that cannot be

⁵ Officially, we are living in the geological epoch called the Holocene, but there is a movement to change the name of our current epoch to the Anthropocene, due to the effect that mankind is having on the planet. After 11,700 years of Holocene living, this is a major change and is not being entered into lightly. The International Commission on Stratigraphy is responsible for deciding and defining the divisions of geological time.

⁶ Jan A. Zalasiewicz and Mark Williams, “Dawn of the Anthropocene: 5 Ways We Know How Humans Have Triggered a New Geological Epoch”, March 19, 2016, <https://theanthropocene.org/topics/jan-a-zalasiewicz/>

⁷ When holding the two creation stories in tension together with the teachings of Christ on servant leadership a more careful reading of Genesis 1 and 2 interprets what is written as **stewardship under God** rather than self-assertive domination. The tendency of this interpretation lends itself to a more responsible use and care of God's creation given to humans rather than exploitation. It should be noted, however, that the great majority of theologians working on the care of creation and climate change have now become very wary of the model of stewardship. It has been too easily misused and lends itself to what is called an ‘instrumental’ worth of the rest of creation rather than one that delights in its own ‘intrinsic’ value. In other words, the value of a tree depends upon what use I can put to it rather than it having any value in and of itself through simply being a tree. One of the earliest and most forceful criticisms of the stewardship model is Clare Palmer, ‘Stewardship: a Case Study in Environmental Ethics’, originally published in Ian Ball, et al., *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology* (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 67-86. Reprinted in R.J. Berry (ed.), *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 63-75.

⁸ *For the Sake of the Planet and all its People*, Resolution 06.101, Assembly Standing Committee, Uniting Church in Australia

reversed.⁹

- 2.9 The Uniting Church does not come to this moment in time without resources. It first proclaimed its concern for the environment in its inaugural Statement to the Nation in 1977. The Statement called for a right use of energy, the protection of the environment, “and the replenishment of the earth’s resources”.¹⁰ We are heirs to its forward-looking concern.
- 2.10 The Uniting Church further declared in 1991 that “nature has a right to the protection of its eco-systems, species, and populations in their interconnectedness” and that “future generations have a right to sufficient thermal exchange between the earth and space”¹¹. The Church issued further statements on the environment and climate impact in 2003, 2006, and 2014.¹²
- 2.11 The Uniting Church affirms the unique place and wisdom of First Peoples in relation to the land. The Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church recognises that:
- “Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial”.*¹³
- 2.12 For tens of thousands of years Aboriginal people have managed a whole continent in ways that were sustainable long-term and delivered food and resource security. In contrast to Western modes of thinking, Aboriginal thinking starts from relational connectedness. Climate change is understood as a threat to personal identity and responsibility and equally a threat to family, clan and nation. As “land and sea are inextricably linked with indigenous cultural identities, a changing climate threatens ceremony, hunting practices, sacred sites, bush tucker and bush medicine, which in turn affects law, home, health, education, livelihood and purpose”.¹⁴ Underpinning Aboriginal thinking is the sense of earth as mother who cares for us and to whom we are responsible to care. Indigenous knowledges are important in addressing climate change and a rich resource for theology.¹⁵

3. An Informed Faith

- 3.1 Through its Basis of Union the Uniting Church is committed to an “informed faith”. Paragraph 11 sets the church’s capacity to act “trustingly in obedience in God’s living Word” and not to turn away from the “scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries”. The church is called to “sharpen its understanding of the will and

⁹ Earth system science examines the way in which the planetary system (and its various ‘spheres’ - e.g. atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, biosphere, lithosphere and geosphere interact. It is part of a much larger whole. What is happening in the rock strata of the Earth is no longer simply a concern of the geologists. See, Tim Lenton, *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Also, see: Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fall of Humans in the Anthropocene*, (Crows Nest, Allen and Unwin, 2017), pp. 9-13.

¹⁰ *Statement to the Nation*, Inaugural Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia, 1977

¹¹ *The Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations*, Sixth Assembly 1991, Resolution 91.14.18, Uniting Church in Australia

¹² The Uniting Church in Australia Assembly has adopted the statements, *Tuvalu and the Impact of Global Warming*, (2003); *For the Sake of the Planet and All its People*, (2006); *An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World* (2009), *Investment in Fossil Fuels* (2014)

¹³ *Revised Preamble of the Uniting Church Constitution* 12th Assembly 2009, Uniting Church in Australia

¹⁴ Ellen van Neervan, “The earth is like a body”, October 26, 2015, <http://rightnow.org.au/essay/the-country-is-like-a-body/>

¹⁵ This paragraph was co-written with and inspired by Rev Tim Matton-Johnson, a Palawa man, Chairperson Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress TAS.

purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought”¹⁶.

- 3.2 We continue to be informed by many working together to address this issue. Global concern has brought together diverse faith-based organisations with inter-governmental and inter-disciplinary bodies seeking to address climate change.¹⁷
- 3.3 The spectrum of Christian belief with regard to climate change is currently the subject of extensive international and inter/transdisciplinary exploration. There is a compelling need for the church at large to become more familiar with this emerging discourse.
- 3.4 The present is a time during which the whole body of Christian thinking needs to be interpreted in the light of climate change. It is time for us to articulate an understanding of faith that calls the church to renew our commitment “to move towards sustainable non-exploitative living, believing that God's creation is precious and the earth's resources exist for the good of all, now as well as for future generations”¹⁸ and diverse creatures of the Earth.
- 3.5 In order to fulfil this calling the Christian faith draws upon the insights of many other disciplines and places them alongside its biblical and theological insights. In the matter of climate change we must listen to voices of “contemporary thought” that come to us through earth and climate sciences, economics, politics and the lived experiences of cultures and other faiths.

4. Wise Practice

- 4.1 It is also time for the church to examine how we are called to live out the Christian faith in the light of an uncertain future. How may we live in ways which are sustainable, which reduce our “footprint” upon the planet, and how may we agitate for change within government, industry and society as a whole? How may our spiritual and liturgical practices shape these actions? These are crucial questions of discipleship to which all people should attend.
- 4.2 It is within these practices that our sense of identity and vocation as followers of Jesus are formed and sustained. It is within these practices that we are able to express our concern and yearning, our lament and our hope. It is within these practices that we engage with God and with creation and participate in the realisation of God's purpose for the world.

5. Commitments

- 5.1 Arising out of our belief (in 2:1) that God is the Creator of the world in which we live and move and have our being, the Uniting Church believes that God calls us into a particular relationship with the rest of creation – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God.
- 5.2 We acknowledge:
 - The Earth system has been adversely affected by human beings.
 - An indisputable link between the human use of fossil fuels which produce greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.
 - Across the world, people and other living species are already feeling the disastrous impacts of climate change.
 - Without immediate and significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions these impacts are expected to worsen.
- 5.3 We confess that the Christian tradition has been complicit in the abuse of creation.

¹⁶ *Basis of Union Revised* (1992 edition), paragraph 11

¹⁷ Christian churches, ecumenical bodies, other faiths and interfaith organisations have long called for the integrity of creation and made statements aligned with other bodies calling for action on climate change.

¹⁸ *For the Sake of the Planet and all its People*, Resolution 06.101, Assembly Standing Committee, Uniting Church in Australia

- The whole body of Christian thinking needs to be interpreted in the light of climate change.
- 5.4 We recognise that some of the world's most vulnerable people are suffering as a result of climate change. We have heard some of their voices and must continue to listen to their experiences and act in solidarity with them to relieve this suffering.
- We affirm the unique place and wisdom of the First Peoples in relation to the land.
 - We affirm that for many of our global neighbours, their connection with the land and oceans is integral to their lives and spirituality. Climate change impacts on identity and culture.
 - We must consult and dialogue with Indigenous people in addressing climate change.
- 5.5 To keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, we need a much stronger Australian emission reductions target. This requires a significant commitment to change.
- 5.6 We urge the government to implement policies that will support such a commitment.
- No new coal mines or coal-mine expansion in Australia.
 - A meaningful threshold for oil and gas extraction.
 - Long-term, sustainable and just transition plans for mining communities.
 - Strategies for vulnerable Australians to access affordable renewable energy.
- 5.7 We urge the government and community to accelerate the transition to renewable energy.
- Divestment from fossil fuels.
 - Remove subsidies and benefits for fossil fuels.
 - Remove barriers and prioritise investment in renewable energy and storage.
- 5.8 Australia must work with those most impacted by climate change to assess their vulnerability and implement a plan of action.
- 5.9 We urge the government to implement policies which will:
- Increase Australia's contribution to international climate finance
 - Develop fair and transparent mechanisms for providing compensation for climate-impacted nations and displaced peoples.
 - With the United Nations, develop a humanitarian status for climate-induced migration which applies to international law.
 - Develop initiatives and policies that support sustainable development and enhance climate resilience among vulnerable communities in Australia and overseas.
- 5.10 We encourage all Uniting Church members, congregations, groups, agencies and councils to take practical action.
- Advocate for change and provide a strong voice to vulnerable people.
 - Show leadership, live sustainably and reduce our impact on the earth.
 - Learn from and collaborate with those in climate science, economics, politics, other cultures and other faiths.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Climate change is one of the "signs of the times". In Luke's gospel Jesus invited the crowds to "interpret the present time" (Luke 12:56). Here the word for time is *kairos* rather than *chronos*. The latter refers to calendar time, clock time. The word *kairos* refers to the right time, the opportune time – and, in matters of faith, to the God-appointed time. The present is a *kairos* moment. It is God-given moment wherein we are called to address the threats being posed to creaturely existence through

human-induced climate change.¹⁹ The present is a time for which an appropriate Christian ethic must be sought out and put into practice. For the whole of Creation, the time for action is now.

- (b) **To acknowledge with thanks the long history of advocacy and practical action on climate change carried out by the Uniting Church, including its synods, presbyteries, congregations, agencies, schools and members.**
- (c) **To work with First Peoples in Australia and our church partners in the Pacific, Africa and Asia and other faiths to understand the impacts of climate change on traditional, spiritual and contemporary ways of life.**
- (d) **To encourage Uniting Church members, synods, presbyteries, congregations, agencies and schools to:**
 - i. **Continue to inform themselves and their communities about the causes and consequences of climate change and appropriate responses;**
 - ii. **Advocate for government policies and political action to address climate change;**
 - iii. **Listen to and learn from the voices of vulnerable people across the world who are experiencing firsthand the impact of climate change; and**
 - iv. **Consider ways we can reduce our contribution to climate change, individually and in our communities, set meaningful targets and be transparent with our efforts and outcomes.**

Proposer: Rob Floyd

Seconder: Zac Hatfield Dodds

Rationale:

In recognising this present time as a *kairos* moment, UnitingJustice Australia convened a meeting in February 2016, gathering a round table of theologians, scientists, economists and policy makers to a conversation on a renewed theological and policy position statement from the Uniting Church on climate change. The objective of this roundtable gathering was to map the content and structure of the theological and policy statement on climate change. Carrying on this work, the Assembly Resourcing Unit continued to consult with climate experts, theologians and policy experts and made a concerted effort to include the voices of those most impacted by climate change, in particular our church partners across the world, First Peoples in Australia and culturally diverse members of our church.

The proposals and the Statement included renew the Uniting Church's commitment to strong action on climate change, setting out our commitments to theological reflection, advocacy to government, listening and learning from First Peoples and vulnerable people impacted by climate change and taking practical action that is meaningful and transparent at all levels of our church and community.

¹⁹ For an account of how Luke 12:54-56 might cross the span of time and address climate change, see: Anne F. Elvey, 'Interpreting the Time: Climate Change and the Climate in/of the Gospel of Luke', in Anne Elvey and David Gormley-O'Brien, (eds.), *Climate Change--Cultural Change: Religious Responses and Responsibilities*. (Preston, Victoria: Mosaic Press, 2013), pp. 78-91.

Acknowledgements:

This Statement has been developed with the support of the following people. We are grateful for their passion, commitment and expertise.

Rev Dr Seforosa Carroll

Associate Professor Clive Pearson

Rev Dr Paul Chalson

Rev Dr Clive Ayre

Professor Peter Rayner

Dr Michael Hewson

Zac Hatfield-Dodds

Aletia Dundas

Cath James

Jessica Morthorpe

Rev Tim Matton-Johnson

Tim Torrens

Rev Denise Champion

Ann and Alexander Sloane

Rev James Bhagwan

Marian Waqa

Rev Alimoni Taumoepeau

Evangeline Pua

Rev Dr Jason John

Geoff Bice Dr Deidre Palmer

Rev Elenie Poulos

Bek Christensen

Professor Andrew Pitman

Dr Miriam Pepper

Professor Hilary Bambrick

Dr Tim Senior

Dr Steve Bevis

Rosemary Hudson-Miller

Eira Clapton

Adrian Nipress

We also acknowledge the many people who acted as readers, contributing their time in reading the document and providing comments.