

#BuildBackBetter

A Just Recovery
Post-COVID-19



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY



Uniting **Justice**
AUSTRALIA

Introduction from the President

In this document, the Uniting Church in Australia has outlined a set of principles and key actions that will guide the way to a better future as Australia recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

In the space of just a few months, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the stark inequality and disparity in our Australian society and exacerbated the disadvantage faced by our most vulnerable people.

As Australia looks to a post-COVID-19 world, we have a unique opportunity to renew our vision, to reimagine policy and to find creative ways to rebuild a nation that is just for everyone.

One of the key learnings in this time of crisis is how deeply we are connected to one another, how deeply we depend on each other. What we have seen clearly is that we are only as strong and healthy as the most vulnerable members of our society.

We commend our Federal and State Governments for their collaborative leadership. We have seen that when everyone works together, considering the wellbeing of others, we are a more compassionate and just society.

The principles outlined in this document draw upon the Uniting Church's *Our Vision for a Just Australia* – a statement based on our belief that each person is created in the image of God and deeply loved by God. As Christians, we see in the life and mission of Jesus, God's call for abundant life for all people and the renewal of the whole creation.

The Assembly has drawn the document together with input from across the Church, including from our agencies delivering community services on the ground, our Uniting Aboriginal Islander and Christian Congress (UAICC) and others working in the area of justice.

I commend this resource to congregations and Uniting Church members for your thoughtful engagement and as a resource for your ongoing advocacy at a critical time in our nation's history.

As followers of Christ, we are called to offer a voice for justice and hope in our world today.

Grace and Peace,



Dr Deidre Palmer
President, Uniting Church in Australia

Time to build a resilient, sustainable and just future

As our nation moves from a time of crisis to a time of rebuilding, we recall the Uniting Church vision for a just Australia.

Our Vision for a Just Australia

The Uniting Church in Australia sees a nation where each person and all creation can flourish and enjoy abundant life. We believe the whole world is God's good creation. Each person is made in God's image and is deeply loved by God. In Jesus, God is completing the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation.



Our vision, grounded in the life and mission of Jesus, is for a nation which:

- is characterised by love for one another, of peace with justice, of healing and reconciliation, of welcome and inclusion.
- recognises the equality and dignity of each person.
- recognises sovereignty of First Peoples, has enshrined a First Peoples voice and is committed to truth telling about our history.
- takes seriously our responsibility to care for the whole of creation.
- is outward looking, a generous and compassionate contributor to a just world.

In a post-COVID-19 world

There is much we have learned through this pandemic about who we are as a nation, our vulnerabilities and our strengths. Drawing upon these learnings and the values articulated in our vision, we believe we have an opportunity to create a better future where all people and all creation can flourish.

We have learned:

- Australia and the whole world are not immune from major threats, and that society is only as strong and as healthy as the most vulnerable in our communities.

We need to: Build Resilient Individuals, Families and Communities

- Existing inequalities are exacerbated in times of crisis, increasing the vulnerability of individuals and the whole community. When we make sacrifices for the well-being of the whole of society, we all benefit.

We need to: Build a more equal society

- We are all interconnected. In times of fear and anxiety, racism, isolation and remoteness can lead to less healthy and productive communities.

We need to: Build a nation where everyone is respected and has a voice

- We are capable of innovative solutions and new ways of being. A crisis is an opportunity to reimagine policy.

We need: Creative, collaborative and constructive leadership to rebuild Australia

- Reducing fossil fuel usage is possible and positively impacts the environment and all living things.

We need to: Build for a sustainable future

Key Actions for rebuilding:

Based on the principles outlined above, we believe the following actions are key in the process of rebuilding our nation.

- 1.** Stimulation of the economy with a focus on job creation by investing in projects that are good for all Australians and for our planet.
- 2.** Fix gaps in the social security safety net and ensure a permanent increase to JobSeeker Allowance, providing a liveable safety net for those out-of-work.
- 3.** Ensure community services are properly resourced to support vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, families and communities, and to respond to areas of growing need, including domestic and family violence and mental health.
- 4.** First Peoples and rural and remote communities must have adequate access to food and health services.
- 5.** Develop initiatives that improve access to affordable housing for all people.
- 6.** Ensuring our tax system is fair and transparent, with individuals and corporations contributing fairly to the costs of post-COVID-19 recovery.
- 7.** Doing our share for the global recovery from COVID-19 and building a more equitable, safe and sustainable world for the future.
- 8.** Reducing fossil fuel usage, and excessive consumption of resources to build for a sustainable future.
- 9.** Adequate support for people living with disability and older Australians.
- 10.** Prioritising work towards Voice, Truth and Treaty for First Peoples, meaningful action on incarceration rates for Indigenous Australians and calling out racism and building inclusion across all Australian society.
- 11.** A focus on creating pathways to permanent migration.
- 12.** Collaboration between governments and civil society with political leadership focused on the common good.

Key Actions in detail:

1. Stimulation of the economy with a focus on job creation by investing in projects that are good for all Australians and for our planet.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that meaningful, adequately remunerated employment allows people to live healthy lives and participate in wider society and the economy. Loss of employment leads to poorer health outcomes and the loss of income impacts housing, education and participation in society which impacts negatively on the whole economy.

Therefore, we ask: All governments invest in, and provide the supporting legislative framework, for job creation in sectors that produce good outcomes for all Australians and for the environment. Such opportunities might include:

- affordable housing projects
- renewable energy – research and infrastructure
- public transport infrastructure

2. Fix gaps in the social security safety net and ensure a permanent increase to JobSeeker Allowance, providing a liveable safety net for those out-of-work.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that levels of income support for people who were unemployed prior to pandemic was inadequate. People who are unemployed, or on a carer, disability pension or parenting payment, need to be provided with adequate funds in order to live with dignity and participate in the wider society. Temporary improvements to our social security safety net during the COVID-19 crisis are welcome, but significant holes remain and permanent repairs are essential to build a social security system that is fit for purpose. Without adequate support, unemployment can lead to poorer health outcomes affecting housing, education and participation in society, all of which impacts negatively on the whole economy.

Therefore, we ask: that gaps in the social security safety net be plugged, and a permanent increase to JobSeeker Allowance is maintained to enable people to live with dignity and meet their everyday needs.

3. Ensure community services are properly resourced to support vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, families and communities, and to respond to areas of growing need, including domestic and family violence and mental health.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that there have been significant increases in the number of calls to Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) and mental health emergency help services, and in some states, a marked increase in calls to police relating to DFV. As the effects of the pandemic and responses to it continue to extend across communities, services will experience heightened need, including financial counselling, homelessness services, emergency relief, and services for children and youth at risk. To meet existing and areas of growing need, it is vital services are properly funded and accessible to those who need support.

Therefore, we ask: that community services and supports, including DFV and mental health care, are adequately resourced to meet current and emerging areas of need.

4. First Peoples and rural and remote communities must have adequate access to food and health services.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that communities without appropriate Indigenous supermarket operations were subject to shortages and price gouging. Communities who relied on a nearby regional town for food supplies could not travel to replenish food and other essential supplies during times of lockdown.

Similarly, smaller communities which depend on a nearby regional town for health care and medical services struggled to access these critical services when travel was not possible.

Communication was vitally important in updating health advice and restrictions but failed to reach some isolated communities. Appropriate arrangements were put in place to continue work and schooling from home, but for some communities with limited access to internet or technology this was very difficult.

Availability of personal protective equipment was patchy in remote and rural communities.

For First Peoples these experiences sit in the context of failed *Close the Gap* strategies designed to improve health and education outcomes in these communities, but during the time of emergency these inequalities were exacerbated.

Therefore, we ask: Australian governments to work closely with communities to determine local priorities and implement appropriate solutions to:

- Improve food security for Indigenous communities
- Improve access to health care and medical services
- Better communication of information and access to digital technology

5. Develop initiatives that improve access to affordable housing for all people.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that homeless people have particular health risks which are exacerbated in an emergency situation. Homeless people in Australia fall in to three categories, those sleeping on the streets or in cars, those who are 'couch-surfing' moving about but with no real housing and those in overcrowded family homes. Almost all remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities fall into the latter group. Each of these categories experienced heightened risk. The provision of hotel rooms as crisis accommodation during COVID-19 has been highly successful but further highlighted the ongoing need for affordable solutions.

Therefore, we ask: that affordable housing shortages are addressed by a whole of government (Federal, State, Territory) mid and long-term strategic plan and appropriate implementation.

6. Ensuring our tax system is fair and transparent, with individuals and corporations contributing fairly to the costs of post-COVID-19 recovery.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that we need governments to collect enough revenue through taxes to be able to protect us and support us in times of hardship and emergency. Revenue collection needs to be fair, with everyone contributing according to their means and capacities.

Therefore, we ask: Australian governments ensure individuals and corporations contribute fairly to the costs of a post-COVID-19 recovery.

7. Doing our share for the global recovery from COVID-19 and building a more equitable, safe and sustainable world for the future.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that the world is completely interconnected and interdependent; that inequality in wealth, health and infrastructure harms the privileged as well as the poor; that when we listen to reason and act in unison, we can change the trajectory of disaster across the world.

Therefore, we ask: that the Australian Government:

1. Lead regional collaboration and provide significant financial aid to support the global response to COVID-19, to address the health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic and the road to recovery.
2. Advocate strongly in global forums to ensure vaccines and medication are distributed equitably, and at a realistic cost, across all countries.
3. Advocate in international forums to support global tax reforms to curb tax evasion and avoidance by multinational corporations, thus enabling countries to receive more income to provide services that meet the needs of their people.
4. Continue to pursue reforms that stop Australia being a safe haven for money stolen from developing country governments.
5. Lead a generous international aid program that supports models of development that address social and spiritual needs, embraces indigenous knowledge and is targeted at restoring healthy ecosystems.

8. Reducing fossil fuel usage and excessive consumption of resources to build for a sustainable future.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that when we stop consuming and polluting our planet, it can recover and flourish.

Therefore, we ask: that Australian governments take the same coordinated, farsighted and science-informed approach to tackling climate change as was done for COVID-19, by leading a renewables-based economic recovery that creates jobs and delivers climate justice for all communities in Australia and our global neighbours.

9. Adequate support for people living with disability and older Australians.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that people living with disability and older Australians are particularly vulnerable during a health crisis. They need access to quality care from suitably trained and equipped staff to maintain their health and well-being.

A pandemic has the greatest impact on those who are most vulnerable and in particular COVID-19 presented significant risk to many people with disability and older people, including a greater risk of healthcare discrimination.

People with disability seemed to be an afterthought for the Government, and the Disability Royal Commission released a Statement of Concern, which was followed by an Open Letter to National Cabinet from over 70 disability organisations. The Disability Royal Commission has also released an Issues Paper on Emergency planning and response seeking the experiences of people with disability during Australia's recent emergencies and examples of how people with disability can be kept safe and well and free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation during crises.

The experience of COVID-19 has demonstrated that the community deeply values older people in a way that we believe is not reflected in the public dialogue or the decision making around investment in services to ensure that people's needs are met throughout their life-course.

Therefore, we ask:

- That governments of all levels ensure that people with disability and older people are safe from abuse and have access to quality services.
- That governments of all levels work together and prioritise building inclusion and addressing all forms of discrimination, including by investing in the services vulnerable people need to live to their full potential.
- That the Australian Government commit to implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commissions to ensure appropriate resources are provided to meet the needs of these vulnerable members of our community.

10. Prioritising work towards Voice, Truth and Treaty for First Peoples, meaningful action on incarceration rates for Indigenous Australians and calling out racism and building inclusion across all Australian society.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that entrenched racism comes to the surface during times of crisis. This has taken place openly, for example anti-Chinese and Asian abuse in public and on social media, and more subtle forms, including less concern for the issues experienced by First Peoples, and over-policing in some communities.

Recent events have again brought into focus the violent treatment by police of 'black' citizens.

As Australia moves out of a period of lockdown, we have seen thousands of people around our country show their support for Indigenous Australians and highlight the pressing need to address deaths in custody and support calls for Voice, Truth and Treaty for First Peoples.

Therefore, we ask:

1. Australian governments to take meaningful action, effective, culturally-appropriate and research-based policies and programs on incarceration rates and deaths in custody of Indigenous Australians.
2. The Australian Government to provide First Peoples with a Voice into Federal Government enshrined in the Australian constitution and establish a commission for treaty making.
3. Governments and political leaders to reject all forms of racism, focus on language that respects diversity and support initiatives and activities that build relationships across all our communities.

11. A focus on creating pathways to permanent migration.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: people on temporary visas are particularly vulnerable. There remains a role for temporary migration, such as international students, working holiday makers and programs that provide income opportunities to people from the Pacific to improve their lives and the lives of people in their communities. At the same time, where possible migration should allow people to become permanent Australian residents and citizens. Permanent migration means migrants are more invested in becoming part of the Australian community and reduces their vulnerability to exploitation.

Therefore, we ask: that the Australian Government review and expand current pathways for migrants to become permanent residents and citizens of Australia.

12. Collaboration between governments and civil society with political leadership focused on the common good.

During COVID-19 we have learnt: that in crisis, the best decisions and outcomes come from collaboration between government at all levels, unions and civil society groups arising from and working in local communities.

Therefore, we ask: that Australian governments continue to collaborate broadly in addressing the post-COVID-19 context.