

Raul Sugunananthan:

Hi, my name is Raul Sugunananthan. I'm Policy and Advocacy Officer with the Uniting Church National Assembly and welcome to this interview with the Reverend Tim Matton-Johnson.

We're very privileged to spend some time with Reverend Tim and we're going to be talking about First Nations perspectives on climate justice.

We're having this conversation in light of some Assembly work. At the last Assembly meeting there was a resolution called "A call to climate justice", and it talks about prioritizing First Nations wisdom in this work towards Net Zero (emissions). So we're going to be discussing and unpacking how that looks like from the perspective of Reverend Tim today.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging country. We are both Zooming in from unceded Aboriginal land. I'm Zooming in from the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and I pay my respects to the elders, past, present, and emerging, and I pay my respects to Reverend Tim, who is with us today and is going to be sharing some of his indigenous experience and wisdom.

So I might I hand it over to you now, Reverend Tim, to introduce yourself.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

I'm Tim Matton-Johnson. I'm descended from the Panninher people who were one of the Tasmanian communities of Aboriginal people that were here before invasion, and I live on Kujalina, on Country and I'm wearing today a T-shirt that I picked up about a dozen years ago, when there was a protest about building a bypass across one of our traditional meeting sites on the Kudlana River which is a just a couple of kilometres down the road from where I currently live. I also pay respects to my ancestors who cared for this country that I'm on for 40,000 years or so.

Raul Sugunananthan:

Thank you, Tim. So, I might just give some more of the back story of this Assembly resolution from the Sixteenth Assembly. It's called a Call to Action for Climate Justice - Listening to First Peoples Wisdom, and there are several points that it raised. The first was about furthering the call to climate justice, including encouraging the rest of the Council of the Church councils of the Church to take up a commitment to cut their emissions to net zero by 2040.

It also acknowledges the role that First Peoples have had in these lands down owners. Australia, who have cared for these lands and until colonisation happened was living in a sustainable way, in many regards, particularly when it comes to climate change. Climate change was not a reality until colonisation and the expectation of land really came to the forefront.

As part of the group, a steering committee was set up and it had a few different responsibilities, one to gather data on commitments to greenhouse gas emission reduction

made across the life of the Church, and progress towards those commitments, to share stories, expertise and learning and effective strategies and resources, to reduce emissions prioritising the wisdom of first peoples. And 3, consider how the whole of the Church can move together to net zero emissions by 2040, and there'll be a report coming from the steering group to the next Assembly meeting, and this will continue to be work of the assembly.

And so this conversation is about that. Not that second point number 2 sharing stories, expertise and learning, prioritising the wisdom of first peoples. So thank you, Tim, again, for offering your time to chat about this. Let's get into some of these questions.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

Yep.

Raul Sugunanathan:

So my first question is, what is the basis of a First Peoples theology in relation to the environment?

Tim Matton-Johnson:

So there's sort of 3 points that I'd like to mention. The first one is to understand country which can be understood as the environment in which you live as your first teacher. In other words, work out how everything else manages to live around you and to teach you how you should live in that context. And so you're taking, if you like, the whole of ecological system, planet Earth as country from which you learn how to live sustainably.

The second 1 point that emerges out of that is that you find that everything is connected. So what you're looking at is a holistic picture of what's going on in country. And so one thing will affect the life of another thing, and so forth. In a complex web of interaction and connectedness. And then out of that also comes the third point, consider the welfare of the whole community first. and not your individual aspirations. which is quite the opposite to what most of us actually do.

So these are kind of philosophical underpinnings about how to live sustainably in not only plentiful environments, but also very difficult ones. There's a sense in which the Australian continent since people first came here 60,000 years plus ago.

With the exception of Antarctica, it's probably the most hostile place that any people needed to live in and so it was a, I imagine, for those ancient ancestors. It was a rapid learning curve. Because everything was strange. The plants were ones that weren't there anywhere else in the rest of the world. Most of the plants, and certainly the animals were extremely different.

And so you can see that there was a necessity to start with these kind of principles and to continue them on and to teach communities this kind of basic practical philosophy in the way of sustainability.

One of my reflections about this and mainstream civilisation, if you want to call it that instead of Aboriginal civilisation, is that there are a lot of differences and a lot of drivers within those differences in the mainstream situation that are perhaps more important to deal with than the technical problems are getting to net zero because of things that got us into this situation. I'm thinking of things like, rising in equity, both political, economic, and social, all around the world. In most countries a driving for continuous growth economics in a finite world.

Sooner or later there's got to be a limit to that. So it's all of those sorts of things. See on contrasting 2 civilizations and surviving through the climate change crisis. If you want to use that for shorthand, but it's also about half a dozen other things like acidification of oceans. Pollution, lack of biodiversity. All of those sorts of things come into it as well.

Then there's almost an inevitability that surviving this crisis means changing the way we do civilisation to something that is more like the ancient aboriginal wisdom of those those 3 key points. That's a bit of a long answer, but, yeah, that's I think that that's where first people's wisdom begins to come in at that really deep, underlying philosophical level about what a human society ought to be on this planet.

Raul Sugunanathan:

Right. Something that really struck me from that answer is the way that changing our culture is just as if not more important than finding the technical solutions, because it's not sustainable. If if our philosophical underpinnings of society are beckoning us towards consuming more, and to not worry about the other, worrying about ourselves more, and that has really driven this this ecological crisis.

So it'd be interesting, interested to know a a bit more about how the role of the church can be an agent for cultural change in that sense, because some of the things you mentioned particularly that the community welfare comes first rather than your own, and the idea that we have calls to live in community with one another as Christians. How that might roll, that that Christian theology might have a role in this culture change.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

Yeah, I mean, one of one of the things I've kind of studied and looked into for many years is, and one of my favourite Biblical passages is Romans, chapter 8, where Paul includes the whole of creation as also thirsting for salvation, in Romans, chapter 8. And so to think holistically in our theology rather than in narrow personal relationship kind of ways and so that they and understand that the whole creation, the whole universe, is God's project.

It's not actually our project. But we, if we are wanting to be faithful to that God, we would want to get on board with God's project, so to speak, and so that to have theologies that

think in that way rather than in an in just a narrow personal way, because that's one of the things about our society. We're very good at siloing things, you know. We can get up and speak wonderfully on something like climate change. And then we want to go on. And then the next day We're at the feeling with that big 4 wheel drive wanting to go places. And yeah, there's a bit of attention there, but we somehow have learnt to manage that as ordinary rather than something that we ought to reflect on and so hang on.

How can I do less of that and more of something else, thinking about the needs of the wider community. And of course, Christianity's basic commandments love God and love neighbour, you know, the trees, plants, animals, grubs, and worms, and all of these things are neighbours, because we live on a block of ground where probably all of those things also try to live. So it's having that kind of an understanding. You see that with that one about community, that third point, whole community is also the ecosystem in which the human community lives.

And so we have to think about what that that means in terms of the ecosystem that we might find ourselves being responsible managers of that is part of our community. And that's increasingly the way I try to live. But I also acknowledge that that is difficult, because you have to make your way within that particular style of human civilisation that we've been developing for the last 5 or 6,000 years.

And also you know, yeah, you know, if you live in a high rise building in the middle of a large city, you are going to be dependent on the supermarket for your food, you know. You may be able to grow some tomatoes in a pot, plant, or something or other like that. But on the whole, you cannot exist because everything is connected.

Outside of the kind of some of the constraints that are there in the style of politics, economics, and so on, going around in no matter how critical you might be of them. It is often difficult to escape them. So I got to acknowledge that. And as a baby boomer I probably ridden the normal wave, if you like for longer, probably more successful than the current generation of young people are going to be able to manage it. And so I, you know, need to acknowledge that I'm not perfect, but I am trying to do the things that I can't that might work in the opposite direction. That's the challenge for all of us, I think.

Raul Sugunanathan:

Yeah, thank you for that. I wanted to jump a little deeper on this question of whilst we are so interconnected with the the current structure of our day that aren't embedded in care for creation that are embedded in exploitation whilst being pulled to do our bit. I wanted to come back to that first point you made about country's teacher. and and how we might hear the voice of country in our everyday lives, when we are so surrounded by a system that tries to ignore it.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

Yeah, I think the simplest way to talk about that is sometimes, when we think about the natural world, we, we think really about those places we might go on holiday, to which are

still in a fairly good natural state, and certainly look beautiful, and that sort of thing. But instead to try and think about it, the places where you actually live and work and learning to love country there and getting to know it. Now it's history and there is, you know, most places. There's an opportunity to even think about that.

It's human history all the way back to 60,000 years or so. if you bother to find out from First Nations people about that story, but also think about the, you know what kind of rock is your building built on? Even so you know the geology, if you like. How does water flow through? The geography of your place? Where? Where's the living water? Where's it going? Where's it coming? Is it in pipes?

Is it coming from somewhere else. That's you know that that kind of interconnection, that infrastructure kind of level. Then it's history in in more recent times is important to know about as well, and and what's going on in it. Learn to love, love, love the country that that you're actually spend most of your time on not always thinking of country is that external place where you go and have a great holiday, you know.

And we're not real good at that. But yeah, and and and also where there are green spaces, and even in the city. get to know one of them, one or 2 of them. You know. Go for a walk, make sure you walk to work, goes through a park somewhere, or something like that. And take care to notice the trees, the animals, the plants, and so forth. As living citizens of the same place where you walk every day.

That then begins to reshape your emotional awareness as well as your intellectual awareness of what's going on around.

Raul Sugunananthan:

You have an example from your own experience. Learning to love the country that you're on. What is significant for the land that surrounds you.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

The land here is very dry country. You wouldn't expect that in Tasmania, but we have these valleys where the rain always seems to go round you somewhere between 3 and 400 ml a year, which, if it was a large expansive area, would probably be semi-desert. So it's dry country and I've got, it's a large block of land in the sense of semi-rural. So that means that things like waste water get dealt with on the property, and all of that sort of thing.

And there's room to grow some trees and I've got some endangered eucalypts called the Morrisby's gum and I bought 6 of them about year after we got here, I think, built the house and there are 3 of them that are growing quite well, and flowering, and seeds and whatnot. By now, you know, they're about 8, 9 years old, that sort of thing, but they're on a watering system.

There are 3 that are not on a watering system, and they're interesting. One of them's about 6 meters tall. It seems to have planted it in where there was a bit of a dipper hole.

Maybe there'd been a tree there before, and the developers pushed it over, or something I don't know but it seems to have a sump where runoff gets into it. And so it's grown quite nice and tall.

Another one actually is a couple of meters down slope from where the stormwater off our veranda goes when it rains, so it gets a bit of extra moisture. It's probably about 4 meters tall, flowering for the first time this year and the third one is just sitting in a patch of what was here before we got to it, in the sense of shallow, stony play sort of soil that gets no particular, you know, has to rely on rainfall completely.

It's still going but it's only as tall as I am, and I'm not very big and so in those 3 trees I'm being taught a lesson about the nature of the soil and the ground and the water supply. That is a part of living on this country for plants and for people. Obviously so. So that's a bit of a story, you know, from the last experience of deliberately trying to work in this way of building that community relationship with the country on which I live.

So I've been learning. Country has been teaching me. I thought you could just poke trees in the ground and they grow. But it's not quite like that.

Raul Sugunananthan:

Yeah, that's a really great example and a good call to action for all listeners and viewers and readers of this content to to learn about the country that you're on. Find the stories that then you can go share about what grounds or accounts you know faith in in creation care for you, and if I can briefly share a story. So I live in in West Sydney, in glebe, which is on the land of people and I'm completely surrounded by a built up, you know, urban area. But there's a really an amazing scar tree in Glebe. And this is some reason that I've heard from Uncle Pastor Ray Minniecon, who is a leader at the Indigenous gathering at the Anglican Church here in Glebe and the scar tree. Here is the only example of a scarred tree near Sydney. That is still standing, and the scar trees they have a big scar, and then they have a kind of a shape bit of like a teardrop shape, or cut out of the bark, and that bark was used by indigenous peoples of this land for various things could be things like shields or things to carry things in.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

And it leaves a mark and tells the story of the people that were there and the resistance that it's still standing, and a very privileged to learn from the indigenous gathering at that that Anglican church about their ongoing survival. And and the the role that that that that Scott tree plays in that in that story. And

Raul Sugunananthan:

I think that really grounds some of the creation care that we can think about in a city. What are these stories. And and most importantly, these stories are being held by first nations, people that are living in these cities as well. And and I think relationship and and learning from those stories this part of the part of the solution to this wider culture change we are looking at.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

Yes, that's right. I know, uncle, right we went to Canada together and find out what they do over there. Indigenous people few years ago, yeah. And so it's these little stories. And it's really just about paying attention to what's already there. and rather than you know, I mean. you could walk through that that that park, or whatever, and and be in such a hurry, because you're thinking about what the next appointments gonna be at work.

You just don't notice that anything else is alive except taking that that that time and intentionally to let country, you know. Let country be the first teacher to observe what is around you. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Raul Sugunanathan:

So time to wrap up. So I might ask, was there anything else you'd like to leave us with any final thoughts?

Tim Matton-Johnson:

One, suppose that the really serious level. If we don't engage in this, this, this kind of this, this story and this kind of activity. There is a serious danger of the collapse of civilization, and we're already in our nightly news whether we're talking about Gaza or Ukraine, or some parts of Africa, can see what happens when when the priorities go into power. Politics, when the effort is made in the opposite direction and I suspect that this kind of thing is inequality and inequity, and these sorts of things rise in communities are going to become, you know, more and more frequent touch, more and more people.

And we already have, you know, the last final report of the consultant group on science actually said that there are 3.5 billion people already at risk of adverse climate effects, I mean. There is a serious danger here that you know, the ecological realities will get rid of us.

So that's a bit of a difficult note to kind of finish on, but through that I would say that flipping back to Romans, chapter 8, God's project, you know there is still a way of doing what we do, hopefully filled with hope rather than allowing the despair that sometimes we could be tempted to when we did watch the news at night.

Raul Sugunanathan:

Thank you. Yeah, thank you for that strong call to action and granted, and hope as well. And I might add to that call to action that there is an opportunity, whilst we are grounding ourselves in the country around us, to also join with other people, to raise our voices. The United Church has a commitment to climate justice, not just with our own missions, but to speaking truth to power. And so there are groups you can join things like Australian religious response to climate change. You can have a look at the working for justice, you know, in Church Facebook group to stay up to date with things happening through the United Church and get involved so we can work together on this. So I'll wrap it up there. Thank you so much

for your time, Tim. I hope you I have enjoyed it as much as I have this interview and all the best.

Tim Matton-Johnson:

Thank you, Raul.