

THE CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA AND THE CARE OF CREATION

1. Scientists have been warning the world for several decades of the existential crisis we are facing. The climate is changing to such an extent that the ecological balance of the created world is being upset, with the result that habitats are threatened and peoples and communities face displacement. In more recent decades, this existential threat has become part of the world's political discourse, as nations bring their own perspective to bear on how to manage this crisis. Unsurprisingly, the political discourse is a contested discourse as politicians and governments look for practical solutions, but also solutions that will be accepted by the people. In Australia, we have experienced firsthand the political challenge the climate crisis brings with it. Through that turbulence there has emerged a deeper realisation that the political class will not solve this problem alone, just as the scientific analysis is not in itself a solution. The nature of the crisis is such that it will only be adequately addressed by all sections of our society working collaboratively, each contributing its expertise to lead change. This itself requires a willingness to engage in conversations, to listen carefully to each other, and to reach agreement on common actions. We should not underestimate the challenge this poses.
2. The churches in Australia are part of this conversation. This is a matter that has deep theological resonance, which we will identify shortly. It is not always easy for the churches to speak with one voice on issues of social significance, nor on theological matters. However, we have been on a journey for over a century, taking steps towards Christian unity. That journey has reached the point where we recognise that more unites than divides us. Since the tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Busan, 2013), the churches in Australia have been conscious of walking together on the "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace". This pilgrimage seeks "to foster greater unity among Christians and to respond ... to the challenges facing the human family in our time".¹ As the churches have reflected together on the climate crisis, we have recognised that we do speak with one voice.
3. Each of our churches has a rich theological tradition through which they understand the Christian faith. Each has a particular theological lens for looking at God's

¹ *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper no.224 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2019), #1.

revelation. While at times these different lenses have kept the churches apart, when we considered the theological issues raised by the environmental crisis, we recognised that these different lenses are not speaking different truths but bringing into sharper focus our understanding God's word for our time.

Theological Foundations

4. Christian faith unequivocally affirms that God is the Creator. The opening pages of our Bible give accounts of God creating the world and declaring that creation is good. These accounts point to the harmony that exists within God's creation so that each part of the creation contributes to the support of all the other parts. Some of our churches speak of an "integral ecology", where everything is connected. Creation is an act of divine providence; God is always faithful and does not abandon creation. Indeed, God continually renews and refreshes it, as the psalmist affirms, "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew that face of the ground" (Ps 104:30).
5. The story of God creating the world and all life is also a story of human interaction with creation. As the Bible affirms, God entrusted to humankind the responsibility to till the earth and care for it (Cf. Gen 2:15). The care of creation is thereby a sacred responsibility put on all people. The way we human beings relate to the natural world and to the biodiversity of creation directly reflects the way we relate to God and to other human beings. For this reason, concern about climate change is a core matter of faith.
6. The accounts of creation also tell the story of human sin. It is the human desire to become like God and to be the master of creation. As the Book of Genesis recounts, "when you eat [of the fruit of the tree] ... you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). Today we recognise that the notion of stewardship was distorted whenever human beings separated themselves from the created order, claiming dominion over it. Humans have not always care-fully tilled the earth and cared for it. This anthropocentrism has become more intense as human beings developed the technological know-how and power to exert control and manipulate the created order. This has resulted in the exploitation of creation to such an extent that whole populations are similarly exploited and suffer catastrophic consequences.
7. The recognition that human beings pose a threat to God's creation has led some of our churches to pray that God would "protect the earth from human hands". This stands in

contrast to a typical blessing prayer for food: You are blessed, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have this bread to eat which earth has given and human hands have made.

8. Awareness of the goodness of God's creation and of its exploitation has led our churches to a renewed understanding of the *sacramentality* of creation. The world is impregnated with God's presence and therefore holy. Creation is like an "icon". Nevertheless, we also recognise that there are some in our congregations and elsewhere who are suspicious that the Christian concern for creation might in fact be a modern version of pantheism. Pantheism is the worship of the created world, and probably exists in every age. While some sections of contemporary society may indeed practice a form of pantheism, a proper understanding of the theology of creation and of the sacramentality of creation does not lead to pantheism. Christians do not worship creation, but in caring for it and respecting it, they give honour to the God who created all things. Moreover, the natural world has the power to draw us to God and connect us with God.
9. The theological understanding of creation is even more fully understood when read against the background of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. This fundamental Christian doctrine affirms that God entered the created world in a unique way in Jesus of Nazareth. Hence, in the Incarnation the created order received an even higher dignity: "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14). In the Incarnation, we recognise God's ultimate affirmation of the goodness of creation.
10. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation takes us to the doctrine of salvation, a story of new life and the renewal of all creation. The death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the declaration that God's reign has dawned. All creation is caught up in the mystery of Christ; "all things have been created in him and through him" (Col 1:16). This is a new lens through which we may see the natural world: embraced and renewed in Christ, ever more capable of revealing the glory of God.
11. We now live in anticipation of the fullness of God's reign. We live in the "in-between" time, as it were. Christ is at work in us and in all creation, renewing, perfecting. This is a crucial time where we give witness to what life in Christ looks like. Christians, endowed with the Spirit of the risen Christ, have a mission to serve the divine plan, which is a plan for the unity of all creation. Everything is interconnected.

Seeing the bigger picture

12. The Lord hears the cry of the poor (Cf. Ps 34:18). This cry from the psalms was visible in Jesus' response to the marginalised. His transformation of their lives was a sign that the reign of God had dawned. This attitude has characterised Christian action through the centuries.
13. Today, not only does the earth cry out, but those close to the earth also cry out. These are the people who are suffering most directly from the climate crisis. It includes Australia's first nations peoples who have a special connection to the land. It includes our neighbours in the Pacific who face inundation from rising sea levels. It includes the poor who are exploited by those who re-purpose their lands for commercial gain. It also includes our farmers who face the death of once productive land. And then there are peoples and towns who face challenges as polluting industries close their operations. All of these groups and others like them, are the poor who cry out to the Lord today. These are the people at the margins, who are the privileged hearers of the word of God.
14. The Christian community, following the path of Jesus, is called to listen to these voices. In listening to them, we will listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. This moment in our history calls us to read the signs of the times and to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.
15. We have the capacity to foster dialogue among people so that not only are the voices at the margins heard, but their cries are also heard. Dialogue does not create winners and losers. Rather, dialogue is a movement towards unity. This is a unity that not only embraces different peoples and populations, but also includes unity with all of creation.

Some resources

16. Our churches have been reflecting on the ecological crisis for several decades and discerning what the Spirit is saying to all of us. Below is a list of basic resources.

- International Commission for Anglican–Orthodox Dialogue.

Stewards of Creation: A Hope-Filled Ecology

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/421649/stewards-of-creation-a-hope-filled-ecology.pdf>

- Greek Orthodox Church.
On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
- Lutheran Church of Australia.
God's Creation: A Sacred Responsibility (2015),
<https://lca.box.com/shared/static/t92lbrrxr2msf2juoj6io691fn8yvc00.pdf>
Caring for God's Creation.
- Religious Society of Friends (Quakers Australia)
Climate Emergency and Species Extinction (2023),
<https://www.quakersaustralia.info/speciesandclimate>
- Roman Catholic Church.
Laudato Si': On the Care of our Common Home, encyclical letter of Pope Francis,
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- Salvation Army.
Caring for the Environment (2021),
https://s3.amazonaws.com/cache.salvationarmy.org/61b9802b-e89d-4607-a3c6-f4d88d2cf23c_Caring+for+the+Environment+-+July+2021.pdf
Responsibility for the Creation: A Discussion Paper (2022),
https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/scribe/sites/masic/files/discussion_papers/MAS_IC_Responsibility_to_Care_for_the_Creation_final.pdf
- Uniting Church in Australia.
National Climate Action Plan (2021), <https://uniting.church/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Assembly-National-Climate-Action-Plan.pdf>