

LIVING IN HARMONY WITH CREATION

Consultation paper on the role of the Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania in addressing climate change. May 2020.

Initial comments from Rev Dr David Merritt

A welcome initiative

I was very pleased to see this Consultation paper. Climate Change is one of the most urgent challenges facing the people of planet earth.

At a time when the numbers of Australians actively involved in the churches or publically affirming a role for 'Christianity' in the life of the community are declining, it is encouraging to see a substantial paper addressing this issue. (I will use 'Christianity' rather than 'Christian faith' or 'Christian beliefs' or 'the Way of Jesus' because of the diverse connotations of all of these and similar terms that tend to make them of limited use in the churches and even less use in a public document).

I am pleased that all of the extensive references (other than Scriptures) are 21st century sources – and in most instances from this decade. The main exception is Bultmann (See later for my comments on his theological contribution). This is up to date work.

I am also pleased to see the extensive quotations from and references to up-to-date science from established authorities dealing with climate change, especially the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and The World Meteorological Organisation.

I also commend the very measured statements about the established science of climate change where you identify inconclusive science and call in question overstatements about the effects of climate change on some weather phenomena such as bushfires. That moderate tone commends the Paper for serious attention.

I was also pleased to see the depth and seriousness with which issues are addressed. It is a substantial document of 62 pages. The Justice and International Mission Cluster is to be congratulated on investing the energy appropriate to such an all encompassing contemporary issue. Providing an Executive Summary provides a balance to the likely deterrent for many people of such a substantial document.

I commend the draft Consultation paper because it invites comments and sets out a number of specific questions to which it invites answers. And I realise in this comment I am not replying to those specific questions so may be less helpful than if I did respond to the questions. However my response affects several parts of the document and its perspective as a whole.

Serious limitations

In spite of my strongly favourable initial response I have serious reservations about this document.

1. **For effective communication it is important to use the language and concepts of the audience that is addressed.** If we were addressing Koreans in Korea, presumably common sense would require that we wrote in Korean. I would expect the document as a whole and especially the recommendations that are intended to go from the Synod to parliaments to be written using modern day concepts and language. This is not the case. Some ancient religious terms are used that will baffle some contemporary readers in the church and the community.
2. **I am assuming that the ultimate audience is contemporary Australians** in both the community generally and in the parliaments of Australia – though the

preliminary audience to approve the document is participants in the meeting of the Synod of Victoria later in 2020.

Focussing particularly on pages 9 -11 and 35 - 44 there are many concepts and terms not only not in current use in the community but likely to be misunderstood and sometimes to alienate readers in our churches, in the wider community, and importantly, many of the decision-makers in Australian parliaments.

Examples are: creation, creation texts from Genesis, Noah and The Flood reference, stewardship, Trinitarian language, Spirit, prophetic role, called by God, biblical quotations and references from Leviticus, Jubilee references.... There are many more. This is enough to make the point.

Let me illustrate the problem I see in relation to the term 'creation'. The widely accepted science dealing with the origin of our planet is formation over billions of years from the gasses and dust of the violent formation of stars and planets resulting from the Big Bang. Our planet was uninhabitable for billions of years. Single cell life emerged around 3.5 billion years ago and modern humans evolved from animal ancestors and early humans around 200,000 years ago. (I have not fact-checked these figures so they are approximate but make my main point)

Against this knowledge, taught in our schools and assumed by most Australians, to use the nearly 3000 year old texts from Genesis not as imaginative myths of an ancient people but as descriptive narrative for people today is startling. More importantly for this document, it is likely to work against the important concepts of responsibility and action that are the intended focus of the document.

3. **It is confronting that in a paper that gives detailed respectful attention to science when dealing with climate change, science is ignored (and implicitly contradicted) when dealing with the relation of humans to the world ecosystem.** There are frequent references to “God making humans in God’s image” and “ God creating man as a gardener”, taking nearly 3000 year old scripture texts as a basis for discussing a contemporary understanding of humanity’s relation to our global environment. It is not just that I am startled. I am seriously alienated and think that many of the intended readers will react that way.
4. **The previous point has implications for a sense of moral superiority which may be seen to be attached to the reference to the ‘prophetic role’ of the Synod and Christians.** The history of western churches in damaging the lives of humans by using biblical texts taken out of context has been vividly illustrated recently in public discussion of attitudes to LGBTIQ people in Australia and in the discussions about same-sex marriage. As well, many will know of the churches’ role in the subjugation of women and support for slavery – all based on biblical texts regarded as applying to people now.
5. **There are recurring ambiguities about the concept of the Synod “calling an emergency” or the Synod “calling for an emergency”.** The former seems to me absurd if action beyond church members and agencies is sought. The Synod can speak about itself “calling an emergency” but what that would mean other than requiring action by Synod agencies is unclear. Anything intended to be wider would be unfounded arrogance. On the other hand a case by the Synod for state and federal governments to declare an emergency could be possible with a carefully presented case, which seems to be part of the purpose of this paper.
6. **It is clearly important to provide a ‘Christian’ perspective to the source of recommendations to parliaments as well as to the church’s own members**

related to the case for actions by the Synod and congregations. But to assume that concepts and language used 'in-house' are appropriate for public action seems to me a mistake likely to guarantee the project as a whole will fail. It is interesting that in the reproduction of previous decisions and actions of the Synod there are almost no examples of the specialist biblical and theological terms that seem to me so problematic in this document.

7. There are two broad possibilities I see.
 - **One possibility** is to take into account more consciously the concepts and language appropriate to the parts of the document addressed to the Synod to support the case for community action and what concepts and language are appropriate in the parts addressed to wider community groups, especially parliaments, that will result from those discussions in the Synod. This would not be an especially difficult task.
 - **The second possibility** is to take into account throughout the whole document this wide gap in concepts and language current in the religious and secular communities we inhabit. Until the church becomes more adept at this, our voice is unlikely to be heard conveying a 'prophetic' stance.
8. As a tentative suggestion, I **wonder what more is required in a church recommendation to the wider community for action on climate change than something along the following lines?**

'In arriving at these conclusions as a church about the urgency of action on climate change we have been guided by

- the clarity of evidence-based science about the reality of climate change and its likely consequences,
- the strong teachings in our religious heritage about ethical treatment of all people and the core role of action to bring justice to all peoples,
- the emphasis in our religious tradition that all people should be carers of the earth that is our home,
- the central teaching by Jesus that love for our neighbour as for ourselves is both a summary of what it means to be in relation to God and a guide to a just and loving life, and
- the pleas of the church communities in the Pacific with whom we have special relationships, especially Tuvalu, that they need urgent help as they face a fast approaching future in which rising sea levels from climate change threaten their low-lying island homes.'

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9. My final concern in these initial comments is deeply personal and passionate. **This document does not express my understanding of the 'Christian' tradition**, the significance of our Scriptures, the central importance of Jesus (though this is sometimes referred to in relation to 'love for neighbour') or the relation of 'Christianity' to contemporary knowledge. This last point is stated in the Basis of Union as foundational for the Uniting Church (Basis of Union clause 11, acknowledged briefly in this Consultation Paper on p.29.) Because of my contacts in the Uniting Church I know there are many participants in our churches who share this perspective.

To read ancient texts taken out of historical contexts, to read Genesis myths that can be wondrous in historical perspective but have no direct relevance as descriptive historic documents or as sources of contemporary action (Genesis chs 1

and 2 about the origin of human life or planet earth) and later in Genesis for the Noah myth about a great flood, or references to Jubilee, or to read the late first century/early second century 'Revelation to John' as relevant to contemporary action about care for the earth. To put it mildly, all of these passages leave me excluded from this document.

To choose Karl Barth as a primary theological source for a contemporary understanding of 'Christianity' may favour and be helpful to neo-orthodox scholars but ignores nearly a century of post-orthodox scholarship. When referring to extensive quotes from theologian Jurgen Moltmann, the text states, correctly, 'There are many other theologians that would offer different views on eco-theology' but does not refer to them. I recognise that Sallie McFague argues more cogently from contemporary concerns and generally uses language more accessible to non-specialist theologians.

At the very least, there needs to be some recognition the church community is more diverse in how it understands 'Christianity', how it uses ancient biblical texts, and how it formulates guidelines for ethical action today.

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