



The Challenge to the Uniting Church – reaching Net Zero Emissions by 2040 – Discussion Sheet

Issued February 2023

The scientific evidence is that climate change is already causing severe harm to the lives of hundreds of millions of people across the globe. Climate change will cause increased extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heat waves), rising sea levels and loss of food production.

Addressing human-induced climate change will require a sustained global effort over decades. Actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions made now will take decades to reduce the harm caused by climate change. Failing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions now will lock the planet into further climate change, with increased climate-related damage. Failing to act will also make it harder to mitigate the impacts of climate change in the future.

A proportionate and urgent response to reducing carbon emissions could only ever be effectively achieved through a scalable government response. The 2015 Paris Agreement set a goal amongst 196 governments to limit global warming to no more than an average temperature increase of 1.5°C. Obtaining that limit is believed to require a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 45% by 2030 based on 2010 levels and reaching net zero carbon emissions globally by 2050. Yet, catastrophically, the global effort is on track to increase greenhouse gas emissions by 11% by 2030.¹

At the 2021 Synod meeting, the Synod adopted a position on climate change that included the following:

That the Synod resolved:

- a) *To acknowledge that God calls us to live in harmony with our natural environment and to seek justice and well-being for all creation.*
- b) *To affirm the covenanting relationship between the Uniting Church in Australia and the UAICC, and our relationships with our partner churches in the Pacific, as these groups are significantly impacted by climate change.*
- c) *To acknowledge that the World Council of Churches Executive Committee has declared a climate emergency “which demands an urgent and unprecedented response by everyone everywhere”.*
- d) *To acknowledge the need for immediate and substantial action by governments, businesses and communities, including the councils and institutions of the church in this Synod, to mitigate climate change caused by human activity and the threat it poses to God’s good creation.*
- e) *To undertake urgent action on climate change based on the overwhelming scientific evidence and the Synod Vision and Mission Principles that guide the Synod to “care for creation” and “live justly and seek justice for all”.*
- f) *Encourage members of the church to join the Synod Climate Action Task Force to identify and facilitate actions for the councils and institutions of the church in this Synod to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.*

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition>

- g) *To request congregations to inform their presbyteries what actions they are already taking to address climate change and for the presbyteries to provide that information to the Synod Climate Action Task Force and report back to Synod 2022 with an update.*

The strategy of the Synod to reduce its own emissions was to have the Synod Climate Action Task Force encourage, facilitate and assist all parts of the Synod in taking as much action as possible to reduce their emissions. The Task Force has been made up of interested members from Presbyteries and congregations, staff from Synod operations and from Uniting Vic.Tas.

Net Zero Emissions by 2040?

Members of the 16th National Assembly meeting in May 2022 passed a resolution that called

on all Councils of the church, agencies and schools who have not already done so to join with the Assembly in committing to net zero emissions by 2040 at the latest so that together we can become a zero emissions Church.

The resolution passed by the National Assembly was not in conjunction with any plan on how net zero emissions would be achieved or what should count as part of the Synod's emissions. At the time of writing, no Synod has a plan to reach net zero emissions. The National Assembly office has a plan to reach net zero emissions by reducing its emissions by 5% a year. The Synod of NSW.ACT has a policy from May 2022 to achieve 100% Green Power by 2038.

This sheet seeks your feedback on whether the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania should commit ourselves to reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 or earlier, as requested by the resolution of the members of the National Assembly meeting. If such a commitment is made what should be counted as part of the greenhouse gas emissions of the Synod? How much should the Synod let others pay for the emission reductions through initiatives paid for by government revenue?

There is no binary choice between committing to net zero emissions and doing nothing. Even if the Synod decided not to commit to net zero emissions, all parts of the Synod should still seek to do all they can to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

What emissions should be included in the net zero goal?

The National Assembly resolution requesting that other parts of the Uniting Church commit to net zero greenhouse gas emissions did not specify what should be included or which emissions needed to be addressed. Technically, greenhouse gas emissions can be classified as scope 1, 2 or 3.

- **Scope 1** emissions are the direct greenhouse gas emissions from sources owned or controlled by the reporting organisation. For example, gas used in heaters and stoves.
- **Scope 2** refers to indirect emissions from using electricity, heating or cooling in the organisation. For example, emissions associated with electricity used from the grid.
- **Scope 3** emissions are those indirectly associated with the Synod's operations. For example, the emissions associated with the goods and services that the Synod buys. For the Synod, it would also include the emissions of people travelling to our churches to attend services or other activities. Scope 3 emissions are the most difficult to track, but they often dwarf an organisation's direct emissions.



Offsetting emissions that cannot be eliminated

The reality for the Synod will be that some sources of greenhouse gas emissions that cannot be eliminated. To achieve net zero on an on-going basis, the Synod will need to purchase offsets to address those emissions. It's also likely there will be parts of the Synod unwilling to reduce their emissions. Therefore, it will also be necessary to purchase offsets against their emissions to reach net zero emissions across the Synod.

An emission offset means paying someone else to reduce emissions to 'offset' the emissions your organisation cannot limit. It can also mean paying for or buying something that reduces emissions elsewhere to offset the greenhouse gas emissions generated in our activities. An example would be purchasing rooftop solar systems that generate excess electricity to be sent back into the grid to offset emissions from another congregation.

If used carelessly, offsets could slow progress on addressing climate change and amount to little more than greenwashing. However, when used responsibly, they can accelerate action on climate change beyond the slow pace that has so far been set and enabled through government policies.²

Several activities could generate offsets for us:

- Install extra solar panels on Synod properties to generate electricity beyond our needs. The extra electricity is fed into the grid to offset other emissions from the Synod;
- Purchase a large-scale renewable energy project, such as a solar or wind farm. Such an approach has been adopted by another denomination;
- Fund projects in First Nations communities that they have requested that reduce their emissions; and
- Purchase commercial offsets under a regulated offset scheme.

Provide your feedback

The Synod Climate Action Task Force is keen to hear the views of Uniting Church members on what action the Synod should take in response to the National Assembly resolution requesting that all Synods reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 at the latest. We are also eager to have conversations with members about their views. We will be very willing to travel to meet with people wanting to discuss the issues raised by this discussion sheet or any additional issues related to the Synod reaching net zero emissions by 2040 at the latest.

Written feedback can be provided to:

Justice and International Mission Cluster
Centre for Theology and Ministry
29 College Crescent
Parkville, Victoria, 3052

Feedback or requests for a conversation can also be provided by e-mail to Timothy.Molineux@victas.uca.org.au. For a direct phone conversation or to set up a conversation, call (03) 9340 8868.

Please provide all written feedback by **Monday 29 May 2023**.

² Carbonhalo, 'The Hidden Truth About Carbon Credits', 2.

Consultation Questions

Please feel free to answer as many or as few of the questions below that you wish to make response to.

1. Should the Synod aim to reach net zero emissions as requested by the 16th National Assembly meeting? If so, by what date should it commit to meeting net zero emissions?
2. Should the Synod take responsibility for Scope 3 emissions? There are the emissions associated with the things it buys, the corporations it invests in and the emissions from people driving to its churches and other places where church activities take place.
3. Should the Synod accept government subsidies in its actions to reach net zero emissions? If yes, are there any limits to what subsidies should be pursued?
4. What are the barriers to your part of the Synod taking further actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?
5. What further actions could the Synod take to make reducing emissions easier or feasible?
6. Are there actions or responses that could incorporate the wisdom of First Nations people concerning climate change?
7. In your view, do the commitments from Commonwealth, Victorian and Tasmanian Governments reduce the need for the Synod to account for emissions associated with its operations and activities? Do government actions impact a net zero commitment by the Synod? If so, in what way?
8. Do you have a view on how the Synod should fund the actions needed to reduce its emissions and pay for offsets enabling us to reach net zero emissions?
9. Should the Synod set up an Emissions Reduction Fund to provide funding for Synod bodies to take action to reduce their emissions? If so, should that be funded from existing Synod funds, by setting aside a certain percentage of property sales or from some other means?
10. If an Emissions Reduction Fund is established:
 - Which parts of the Synod should be able to draw down from it?
 - Should it provide loans, grants or both for emission-reducing activities?
11. Do you have a preference for the type of offset strategy the Synod should adopt to address emissions it cannot eliminate from its activities and operations? If so, why?

