

Ecological Engagement

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This chapter explores Uniting Church engagement on matters of our relationship with other-than-human Creation in the new millennium.

We have drawn upon a wide diversity of sources—previous scholarship into Uniting Church ecological engagement, interviews with some fifteen to twenty present and former staff and ecological advocates from across the church, analysis of a variety of documents, quantitative surveys of ecological views and actions, and our own experience as practitioners and advocates.

We structure the chapter as follows. First, we provide a brief presentation of ecological reflection and praxis in the Uniting Church in its first two decades, and at the same time start to introduce several categories of ecotheological thought. Next, we examine the ecotheological tendencies within the church, followed by activity in theological colleges. We then conduct an organisational analysis of how the Assembly and Synod councils and agencies have engaged with ecological matters, followed by an examination of congregational activity. Finally, we discuss key trends across the new millennium and offer some thoughts for the future.

Before we begin, some definitions are in order. The term ‘the environment’ might be used by many to describe the subject matter with which we are concerned. However, we avoid this term (unless quoting others) because in common usage, it tends to reflect a sharp distinction either between human subjects and other-than-human objects, or is used to refer to ‘the stage’ for human action. Instead, we prefer the adjective ‘ecological’, which reflects processes of dynamic interconnection and influence in the web of life. We use the proper noun Earth when talking about the planet of which we are a part. The term Creation refers to the whole Universe, although materials that we examine may themselves use it to mean Earth or ‘the environment’. Finally, Church refers to Christianity globally, and church or UCA to the Uniting Church specifically.

Context: Union to 1999

The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* states that Creation is at the heart of God's mission,

God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view *for the whole creation*. The Church's call is to serve *that end*.¹

This model of Church as servant of this mission to all Creation is informed by passages such as Romans 8, Colossians 1 and Genesis 2.

Also at Union, the UCA released a *Statement to the Nation*. This expressed a very different theology: the dominion theology of Genesis 1. 'The environment' was described as a collection of inanimate resources, which exist for the use of humans and which is to be fairly shared amongst them,

We are concerned with the basic *human* rights of future generations and will urge the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for *their* [human] use and enjoyment.²

In 1988, a second *Statement to the Nation*³ expressed the increasingly popular model of responsible stewardship, and included an explicit attribution of intrinsic worth to the rest of Creation.

Dominion models assume that Earth is ours, a collection of resources given to us by God to share amongst ourselves. Stewardship models accept that the Earth remains the property of God, but that we are given the role of distributing its abundance: sometimes for the sake of all creatures (Earth

1 Uniting Church in Australia, *The Basis of Union* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, 1992), par. 3, emphases added, <http://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union-1971-1992>.

2 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Statement to the Nation: Inaugural Assembly', June 1977, n.p., <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/134-statement-to-the-nation-inaugural-assembly-june-1977>.

3 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Statement to the Nation: Australian Bicentennial Year', 1988, <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/133-statement-to-the-nation-australian-bicentennial-year-1988>.

is intrinsically valuable), sometimes only human needs are considered (instrumental worth/utilitarian approach).

All three models emphasise a sharp distinction between humans and the rest of life, with our special and unique God-given purpose, though 'servant' casts us in a subordinate role.

A fourth model emerged in Assembly worship resources in the 1990s; a 'web of life' approach emphasising humanity's ecological connections to the rest of life on Earth through a series of dynamic relationships, all 'sustained by the Spirit of God...each needing all the others, held in delicate kinship'.⁴

None of the models were critically evaluated,⁵ instead, the church focussed on action,⁶ especially opposing uranium mining and promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency. The Uniting Church's ecological policies pre-dated anything similar from the Catholic or Anglican Churches by at least twenty years, but most of them were 'broad, symbolic, externally directed and non-operational' and those that did concern the church's own operations were poorly implemented.⁷

In the 1990s, church agencies switched from direct ecological public policy engagement to a more educative approach, especially the production of worship resources. Ecological networks outside of the formal councils of the church started to form, such as the Earth Team in Victoria, and by the eve of the new millennium, courses in ecotheology were now being offered.

We now turn to an examination of developments in the Uniting Church from the turn of the new millennium up until early 2013.

4 Assembly Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, 'Healing the Earth: An Australian Christian Reflection on the Renewal of Creation' ([Sydney]:Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, 1990): 31.

5 For a full survey of these models in the UCA see Jason John, 'Biocentric Theology: Christian Celebrating Humans as an Ephemeral Part of Life, Not the Centre of it' (PhD diss., Flinders University, 2005), 25ff, <http://theses.flinders.edu.au/public/adt-SFU20051212.182616/>.

6 Clive Pearson summarised the situation thus, 'The common desire is to be "doing" rather than to recognise the need to develop a theoretical basis and observe the subsequent downstream effects in the ministry and mission of the church.' See Clive Pearson, 'Towards an Australian Ecotheology', *Uniting Church Studies*, 4, no. 1 (1998): 14, 27.

7 Steven Murray Douglas, 'Is "Green" Religion the Solution to the Ecological Crisis? A Case Study of Mainstream Religion in Australia' (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2007), 221.

Theological analysis

The Uniting Church has no distinctive doctrine of creation, but does have a distinctive emphasis: a growing tendency towards a concern for all Creation, as expressed in the third paragraph of the *Basis*, quoted above. We will now highlight that emphasis in official Assembly documents, before examining how well they cohere with the theology being expressed in the pews.

Assembly statements

The first Assembly statement in the new millennium to engage ecotheologically in any depth was the document *For the Sake of the Planet and all its People: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Climate Change* adopted in 2006.⁸ It began with the anthropocentrism of the 1977 *Statement to the Nation*, but quickly qualified this with allusions to the intrinsic value approach of the 1988 *Statement to the Nation* and 1991 *Statement on the Rights of Nature and Rights of Future Generations*.⁹ It also included a passing reference to web of life imagery, or ‘mutuality and interdependence’. *For the Sake* explicitly named the welfare of all creatures and plant life as being important to God. Earth’s resources exist for the good of ‘all creatures and future generations [of humans].’

By 2006 the concepts of mutuality, interdependence and the intrinsic value of the web of life were central to the thinking of many who contributed to or were consulted about *For the Sake*, some of whom expressed serious reservations about the ongoing use of terms like steward in particular. However, due to the perceived urgent need to have an authoritative statement passed by Assembly to support UnitingJustice Australia (UJA) in their growing advocacy work on climate change, and a view that ‘web of life’ approaches were not sufficiently accepted by the mainstream, this model was not given any greater emphasis.

This typified the approach throughout the decade, to enable the majority of Assembly delegates to vote for positive practical outcomes without being

8 Uniting Church in Australia, ‘For the Sake of the Planet and All Its People: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Climate Change’, 2006, <http://www.UJA.org.au/environment/uca-statements/item/481-for-the-sake-of-the-planet-and-all-its-people>.

9 Uniting Church in Australia, ‘The Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations’, 1991, <http://www.UJA.org.au/environment/uca-statements/item/479-the-rights-of-nature-and-the-rights-of-future-generations>.

distracted or derailed by debating their theological basis. UJA intended to engage Assembly with a 'major new statement on environmental issues' in 2009,¹⁰ however the diversity of ecotheologies amongst the contributors to *For the Sake* in 2006, which had led to such a protracted discussion, persisted. Since the key national ecological issue continued to be climate change, and there was already a policy on this, the 'major new statement' was shelved.

Instead an alternative document was produced, *An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World*, which sought to offer 'a Christian perspective on human and ecological wellbeing' and, 'some principles for an alternative economic vision... grounded in the love of God for the good creation and the vision and hope we have for the flourishing and reconciliation of all creation with the Creator and source of life'.¹¹ The statement drew upon concepts that were present in previous statements such as *For the Sake*, but did not develop them significantly. It did, however, show the multiple ways in which human well-being is dependent upon ecological well-being, thus providing a foundation for holistic advocacy work on the part of Uniting Justice, and undermining the tendency of contrasting human justice and ecological issues.

The Assembly's Theology and Discipleship Unit (T&D), who were involved in the 2006 discussions, did not take up the mantle of exploring ecotheology, despite being 'vitaly concerned'¹² about ecotheology and climate change as part of those discussions. With the exception of peacemaking, T&D has been focussed on internal church issues since then.

The development of the ecotheological models described above was therefore limited to worship resources being produced by individuals and Synod justice agencies, and then badged and distributed by UJA.¹³

10 UnitingJustice Australia, 'Report to the Eleventh Assembly', 2006, 8, <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/about/assembly-reports>.

11 Uniting Church in Australia, 'An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World', 2009, <http://www.UJA.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/461-an-economy-of-life-re-imagining-human-progress-for-a-flourishing-world>.

12 Robert Bos email exchange with other contributors to *An Economy of Life*, 2006. Bos was National Consultant for T&D at the time.

13 Space constraints do not allow us present an overview of worship resources, even though this is where all the richness and diversity in ecotheological approaches is found. A fairly comprehensive history of ecotheology in UCA worship resources is being prepared, and will

Church members' ecotheological views

We have presented the theological perspectives expressed in the resolutions and statements produced by the UCA. But what about the perspectives of the people in the pews? In the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS),¹⁴ 18 percent of Uniting Church members felt that caring for the Earth is an essential part of the mission of the Church, and 41 percent felt that while caring for the Earth is a part of the mission of the Church, there are other greater mission priorities. There was no statistically significant difference between the views of UCA and non-UCA people.

When asked about their theology, Uniting Church members were evenly divided over a dominion approach, which sees Earth as being created for us, to rule over, until we move on to our true heavenly home. Roughly one third agreed (29 percent), disagreed (36 percent), and were unsure (35 percent). The vast majority (94 percent) agreed with the ideas that God is present in nature, and can be experienced or met there, and that all life is a reflection of God. Some two thirds (68 percent) agreed on average with the statements that non-human Creation has value independent of its worth to humans, praises God and can be considered a neighbour that Jesus calls us to love. Holding a dominion view was weakly correlated with believing that God is immanent in nature, but uncorrelated with accepting its intrinsic worth. These results indicate that not only is there a diversity of views across the Uniting Church, but that people may hold views that are seemingly contradictory—namely, dominion and intrinsic worth. When it came to views about human origins, six-day creationism declined from 30 percent of Uniting Church members in 2001 to 22 percent in 2011, matched by an increase from 36 percent to 46 percent accepting that evolution and the Bible are reconcilable. By contrast, 38 percent of Christians in other denominations in 2011 held to six-day creationism.¹⁵

be available from <http://unitingearthweb.org.au> and <http://ecofaith.org>.

14 These questions were answered by a representative small sample of participants in the 2011 NCLS. Approximately 130 of the respondents were from the UCA. See Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011). All reported NCLS results are weighted to account for variations in participation across synods.

15 Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey R' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011).

Theological colleges

One place which might provide an opportunity for exploring and developing differing ecotheological paradigms is our theological colleges. However, ecological engagement within curricula and study programs has been patchy in the new millennium, although most colleges have had guest speakers address students and/or have hosted seminars on eco(theo)logical topics that have been open to the broader public. United Theological College in NSW and Uniting College in SA provided most of the formal educational opportunities for ecotheological engagement. Both were at the leading edge of ecotheology internationally in the late 1990s, with undergraduate courses and faculty engaged in research and publication.

With the strong ecumenical links in SA, and the move to a new common campus, there was optimism that academic projects like the Earth Bible Project (started in 1997) could be accompanied by practical expressions of Earth care on the new campus grounds. In NSW, significant numbers of students, including especially those from the Pacific Islands, engaged in undergraduate ecotheology, a course which was significant internationally and which sparked similar courses in the Pacific Islands.

However, when the UTC became part of Charles Sturt University in 2007, the ecotheology course was no longer available to undergraduates. Ecotheology courses in SA are now also only postgraduate, with approximately three electives taught in alternate years. With increasing funding pressure, the future of elective subjects is uncertain, and there is little likelihood of a return of undergraduate subjects.

Six doctoral students in NSW and four in SA have undertaken projects with ecotheological themes in the past decade.¹⁶ There have also been a 'good deal more' BTh (Hons) and MTheolStudies dissertations in the field in SA.¹⁷ In spite of the academic interest in both NSW and SA, only two articles explicitly engage with ecotheology in the Uniting Church's own journal, *Uniting Church Studies*.

16 At least one more UCA doctorate has been completed, but outside of the theological college system.

17 Stephen Downs, personal communication, 11 September 2012.

Coolamon College, the UCA distance education provider, offered bachelor courses in creation spirituality before being wound down in 2009, when the Assembly delegated responsibilities for distance education to each Synod. In NSW/ACT, the Education for Life and Ministry unit (ELM) which could have taken on those creation spirituality courses was shut down in 2011, and had to that point focused on a narrow range of subjects for training lay leaders for traditional church roles. While ELM did encourage trying new approaches to worship and exploring new theological insights, it was limited in its ability to develop ecotheological training in any systematic way.

So it appears that in the space of a decade, our two leading ecotheology colleges have been reduced to offering postgraduate-only courses. The single subject offered in NSW primarily attracts overseas students on site, and the three in SA are under threat. With the closure of Coolamon and dismantling of other non-degree teaching centres, there appears to be no real possibility of non-postgraduate engagement with ecotheology through the UCA. While this may not be as much of a problem if ecotheology were integrated throughout other subjects and courses in a holistic way, our discussions with faculty members suggest that this has been limited.

Assembly and Synod engagement

Having provided an overview of ecotheology and formal ecotheological education within the Uniting Church, we now turn our attention to an organisational analysis of how the Assembly and the Synods have engaged ecologically. Our analysis of the Assembly focuses particularly on Assembly resolutions and the work of UJA. Our analysis of each of the Synods includes resolutions and the ministries of Synod units and/or staff who have been tasked with ecological agendas, but also extends in places to Presbyteries and networks which occur within the Synods but are not structurally a part of them, given that these have been some of the areas of greatest activity. We acknowledge that there are other less formal ways in which Synod gatherings foster ecological engagement. However, these are less amenable to documentation and analysis for our purposes, except to the extent that they may be reflected in the responses to the NCLS as discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

National Assembly

The Assembly began the new millennium with a brief re-engagement in the nuclear fuel issue.¹⁸ In 2003, UnitingWorld led the Assembly to adopt a statement about Tuvalu in the context of climate change, and continues to be involved in this issue because of its impact on human wellbeing in our partner churches. The statement called on the government to sign the Kyoto Protocol and offer a haven for Tuvaluan climate refugees, and called the church to prayer.¹⁹ A subsequent resolution in 2006 ratified the 2003 statement, and 'call[ed] upon the people of the Uniting Church to adopt lifestyles which have a minimal impact on global warming'.²⁰ A larger set of resolutions which requested councils and agencies of the church to minimise their ecological impact, and members to engage in public policy advocacy and to collaborate with environment groups, accompanied the document *For the Sake of the Planet and all its People*, which was the initiative of UJA and adopted by the Assembly in 2006.²¹

UJA's primary activity in the new millennium in terms of ecological ministries was direct advocacy towards government. Advocacy began in earnest in the mid 2000s and was dominated by climate change. This work was in part a response to the requests for solidarity from Pacific church partners, as well as to the World Council of Churches' longstanding climate change advocacy. From 2008 to date, six of UJA's eight submissions to federal government in relation to ecological matters have concerned climate change legislation. The others were about the Mineral Resource Rent Tax²² and a national container deposit system. UJA was also involved in invitation-only ministerial briefings in relation to international climate negotiations and design of a carbon trading scheme.

18 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Nuclear Fuel Cycle Policy', 2000, <http://www.UJA.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/465-nuclear-fuel-cycle-policy>.

19 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Tuvalu and the Impact of Global Warming', 2003, <http://www.UJA.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/463-tuvalu-and-the-impact-of-global-warming>.

20 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Global Warming and its Impact on Pacific Nations', Uniting Church in Australia Eleventh Assembly, 2006, Resolution 06.21.04.

21 Uniting Church in Australia, "For the Sake of the Planet and All Its People".

22 The UCA was the only non-environmental NGO to prepare a MRRT submission.

UJA participated in civil society efforts, including the Climate Action Network Australia and the *Say Yes* campaign in support of the federal Clean Energy Future legislation. The Assembly has also been part of ecumenical and multi-faith initiatives supporting stronger action on climate change, including statements and/or resources coordinated by the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Climate Institute, and Australian Religious Response to Climate Change.

Additional advocacy work grounded in the 2009 *Economy of Life* statement has included participating in a fledgling collaboration involving civil society, business and universities called the Australian National Development Index (ANDI), who aim to introduce a holistic measure of progress beyond economic growth.

Most of UJA's advocacy work has been conducted on behalf of the church. However, it has connected its advocacy with the church membership more broadly in two main ways. Firstly, it has produced non-partisan pre-election resources (including ecological content) for every election in the new millennium. Secondly, UJA also produced factsheets and information resources for church members in areas related to its advocacy work.

Upon the passing of the Clean Energy Future legislation in July 2011, the then President of the Assembly stated that, '... swift action on climate change is one of the greatest moral challenges of our time' and that 'the Uniting Church will continue to be a voice for the planet and all its people and will continue to support measures by the government to take action on climate change'.²³ However, that continuing voice has quietened, and the continued support has not been forthcoming.

UJA, and the Assembly, have had to make increasingly difficult decisions about priorities in the context of limited resources. UJA's emphasis on ecological advocacy has decreased substantially since 2011, and its focus on refugees and asylum seekers (which dominated early in the 2000s) has once again increased.

23 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Uniting Church Commends Australia's Clean Energy Future', Media release, 26 July 2011, <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/environment/news/item/640-church-commends-clean-energy-future>.

UJA expects to put some resources into climate change in the lead up to the 2013 federal election, with the production of an election resource, and anticipates that with a Coalition Government in power climate change will again take a prominent position in its advocacy work. However, climate change has never stopped being a public issue, given the interests that continue to seek to undermine policy efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, Australia is undergoing massive expansion in fossil fuel mining, with an associated carbon footprint that dwarfs our current domestic emissions—and which is contributing towards climatic changes which under a business-as-usual scenario pose an unacceptable risk of staggering numbers of refugees and human deaths this century.

Increasing pressure on resources and prominence of other issues has also been felt in some Synods. The degree to which the Synods have remained ecologically engaged has varied considerably.

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (VicTas) has been the most proactive of the Synods in the new millennium with regard to ecological engagement. This relative strength has been due especially to the efforts of the Earth Team volunteer network, which arose out of youth ministry in the early to mid 1990s and sought to raise ecological awareness and activity across the Synod. Some of the Earth Team's activities included providing practical and liturgical resources to congregations, conducting church energy audits, and holding a Liturgy in the Forest.

After a succession of Order of St Stephen volunteers, the Earth Team was successful in securing a part-time environmental project officer position within the Justice and International Mission (JIM) Unit in the early 2000s. Additionally, ecological advocacy has formed a significant part of the role of the JIM Unit director. Lacking in recruitment of new members, and with its functions increasingly taken up by the JIM Unit, the Earth Team itself effectively disbanded in the middle of the decade. It exists today as an email list.

The VicTas Synod passed five ecological resolutions in the new millennium, including four about climate change in 2002, 2007, 2008 and 2011. These concerned advocating towards governments and requesting congregations

and other church bodies to reduce their energy use. A broad-ranging resolution on forestry was passed in 2004, but only resulted in work around illegal logging due to subsequent contention concerning other aspects of the resolution. The 2004 and 2007 resolutions particularly were based on substantial policy research.²⁴ The 2011 Synod resolution set a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across the Synod by at least 20 percent of current levels by 2020. At the time of writing, a Synod-wide task group has formed to commence implementation of this resolution, perhaps indicating for the first time a broader Synod ownership of an ecological agenda beyond the Earth Team and JIM.

The JIM Unit has engaged strongly in public policy advocacy work in climate change and forestry since the mid 2000s. As in the Assembly and some other Synods, this work has typically occurred as a part of broader civil society coalitions, for example, the JIM Unit helped put climate change on the agenda for the Make Poverty History and Micah Challenge campaigns. The Unit also took the lead on the long running campaign against the importation of illegally logged timber, which eventually led to the passing of the federal Illegal Logging Prohibition Bill in 2012. As has been the case for UJA, much of the Unit's policy advocacy work has been behind the scenes. The broader church has also been involved through sending postcards and letters, signing petitions and attending demonstrations.

Advocacy work dominated the middle of the decade, with more energy in the early and later years being spent on producing congregational resources for liturgy and for practical ecological action. In early 2013, the practical support resources available for congregations cover water, energy, waste, transport, paper use and community gardening. The JIM Unit also provided active support for the ecumenical *Five Leaf Eco-Awards*, a structured program started in 2008 to support and reward congregations for ecological activity. The program has since gained unofficial and unfunded support also in NSW/ACT and WA.

24 David Blair and Margy Dockray, *Forests and Forest Issues in Victoria and Tasmania*, (Melbourne: Justice and International Mission Unit, Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, 2004); Cath James, Andrew Wilson and Mark Zirnsak, *Climate Change: Faith and Action* (Melbourne: Justice and International Mission Unit, Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, 2006).

Synod of NSW and the ACT

Much of the ecological activity that has occurred across the Synod of NSW and the ACT in the new millennium has not been driven by the Synod (although it has partly depended on grants from centralised sources). Examples include the Sydney North Presbytery's Earth Ministry and Mid North Coast (MNC) Ecoministry initiatives, the Hunter Presbytery's 'greening the church' project (2008 onwards), and the informal Synod-wide Uniting Earthweb network.

Initially based at two Sydney congregations from 2002,²⁵ Earth Ministry extended to the broader Presbytery through Waterlines, which brought together worship, prayer, theology, practice and connectedness with waterways in the Lane Cove River catchment. The project ran out of funding and ceased in 2007.²⁶ The MNC Ecoministry initiative (2007 onwards) has focused on Uniting Church collaboration with other local groups, creating a new 'ecofaith' worshipping community, and the greening of the existing church. Since 2008, Uniting Earthweb has shared reflections, news and stories concerning ecological engagement across the Synod, organised events, formulated Synod resolutions and resourced congregations.²⁷ Some members have also participated in nonviolent direct action in protest at the burgeoning coal industry.

The NSW/ACT Synod funds a social justice consultant, though the role has been mostly vacant since 2007. Very significantly, this position is located within UnitingCare and thus has a stronger focus on social service delivery than equivalent positions in other Synods. On the *environment and sustainability* page of the 'advocacy' section on the UnitingCare

25 Barry Leal, 'Wonder and the Will to Care', in *Wonder and the Will to Care: a Multi-Faith Forum on Ecology* (Sydney: Faith and Ecology Network, 2003).

26 Information about the approach and history of Waterlines is available at Uniting Earthweb, 'The Waterlines Project', 2008, <http://www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/waterlines-the-lane-cove-river-catchment>.

27 Major resourcing projects have included Uniting Earthweb Group, *Growing Mission with Community Food: A Practical Resource for Church Congregations*, (Sydney: Uniting Earthweb Group, 2010), <http://www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/growing-mission-with-community-food-a-practical-resource-for-church-congregations> and Uniting Earthweb Group, *Solarising Churches: A Practical Resource for Uniting Churches in NSW* (Uniting Earthweb Group, 2010), <http://www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/solarising-churches-a-practical-guide-for-uniting-churches-in-nsw>.

website, seven of the nine resources are from the 1990s. The most recent piece of work to engage the wider Synod was a 2010 climate change policy discussion paper which, in contrast to policy work in the Assembly and other Synods, opposed carbon trading.²⁸

UnitingCare NSW.ACT has also addressed sustainability issues within its own operations, both as legally required and proactively, as have equivalent agencies around the country. The theological *rationale* accompanying this work derives from the Assembly statements already covered above.²⁹ Assessing the extent of implementation is beyond the scope of this chapter, but would make a valuable investigation in itself. For example, UnitingCare NSW.ACT's 2011/12 report to Synod highlighted sustainability action and the creation of a five-year UnitingCare Ageing Environmental Sustainability Action Plan in 2012.³⁰ The plan was not mentioned in the 2013 report to Synod, but its review draft shows some implementation is underway.

The Synod itself passed ecological resolutions in 2003, 2006, 2008 and 2011. With the exception of the 2003 resolution about depleted uranium, these focused on climate change, renewable energy, energy efficiency and financing of fossil fuel power stations.

Advocacy towards the federal government was conducted in 2010 and 2011 by the then Board of Mission, under the leadership of rural staff, in relation to the social justice impacts of the Murray Darling Basin Plan.³¹ At the time of writing, Synod-wide consultation has commenced, with a view to exploring pastoral and prophetic matters concerning agriculture in the Basin.

Queensland Synod

The Green Church resolutions in 2007 represented the decade's major push for Qld Synod engagement in ecological issues. The resolutions were moved by Andrew Johnson, the Justice and International Mission (JIM)

28 Rex Graham, *UnitingCare Climate Change Discussion Paper* (Sydney: UnitingCare NSW. ACT, 2010).

29 UnitingCare Ageing, 'Environmental Sustainability Action Plan 2012–2017', the review draft is available by request from Uniting Care NSW. ACT.

30 UnitingCare NSW.ACT, *Courage, Faith, Honesty, Advocacy, Fairness, Hope: 2011/2012 Annual Report* (Sydney: UnitingCare NSW.ACT, 2012), http://www.unitingcarenswact.org.au/who_we_are/annual_report.

31 This included two submissions and one public appearance at parliamentary inquiries.

Advocate. They called on congregations to get involved in energy auditing, and established a working group to foster energy reduction in the bigger church agencies.

Initial reactions were hopeful. A lot of positive discussion was generated at Synod, and the idea of being a Green Church seemed a badge of honour. In collaboration with the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the Synod building and four congregations had detailed environmental audits. *Journey*, the Synod's paper, publicised initiatives relating to the resolutions, and continues to run articles on ecological issues to the present.

However, no ongoing funding from either QUT or the Synod was available to continue the auditing project, which then floundered. The increased politicisation of the climate change debate after 2007 meant that congregational interest in having the JIM Advocate deliver climate change talks evaporated. The JIM position itself was discontinued in 2008, due to Synod budget cuts.

Since 2010, UnitingGreen (formerly Green Church) has advocated for and supported ecological engagement in Qld. A 0.2 appointment beginning in mid 2013 represents its first funding. UnitingGreen produces newsletters and attempts to network congregations together, and spearheaded the Queensland Churches Environment Network (QCEN) and National Council of Churches Eco-mission project.

Synod of Western Australia

At the start of the millennium, responsibility for ecological action and advocacy in the Synod of WA rested with the Social Justice Board and the Social Justice Consultant. In 2004, this capacity was expanded to the Social Justice Unit (SJU) consisting of three staff people. Environment/ecology is one of its areas of work.

The WA Synod passed ecological resolutions in 2001, 2005 and 2007. As has been the case in the VicTas and NSW Synods, these resolutions have committed the church to develop commitment to ecological praxis in all parts of its life. By 2007, the focus of the resolutions was squarely on climate change.

Ecological advocacy work has occurred on several fronts, usually as a part of broader coalitions of climate change advocacy organisations, as has been the case with UJA and the JIM Unit. The Synod leadership has also publicly supported the call for the Burrup Peninsular to be included on the World Heritage List, and in late 2008 spoke against the then new Coalition State Government's decision to lift the ban on uranium mining in WA.

The SJU has produced state election resources for congregations, and in 2012 also participated as the lead church partner in a civil society project called 'Empower WA', which was a train-the-trainer model aimed to encourage and equip people to advocate to others about pricing carbon. Empower WA was funded by a federal government grant.

The major projects engaging congregations have occurred since the mid 2000s, and have included the Green Church Handbook which was launched together with the Green Church website in 2006, and Sustainable September which was a civil society collaboration of unions, conservation groups and churches seeking to showcase and drive action for sustainability. Sustainable September worship resources continue to be produced each year.

Synod of South Australia

The mid 2000s saw increased ecological activity in the South Australian church. After widespread feedback, the Presbytery/Synod was forced in 2006 to add 'Justice' to its strategic plan, which incorporated a practical and theological response to ecological issues and was to include developing a clear 'biblical statement' on the obligation to care for God's Creation. Practically, the Resource Board was asked to investigate making properties as close as possible to being self-sustaining in power and water usage and supply. In 2007 the Presbytery/Synod accepted a set of proposals from the Environmental Church Properties (ECP) Working Group to move towards increased 'environmental sustainability' in all aspects of its property management.³²

The Scots Church Ecoministry in the Adelaide CBD began in late 2005, with the aim of helping to bring the spiritual, theological and practical

32 Uniting Church in Australia Presbytery and Synod of South Australia, 'Decisions of the Presbytery and Synod of South Australia, May–November 2007', 14–15, <http://sa.uca.org.au/pres-synod-meetings/previous-presbytery-and-synod-meetings>.

elements of the relationship between humans and the rest of Creation together. A new ecofaith community started meeting outdoors as part of the ministry. \$8,800 was also provided by Synod for the Ecoministry to help churches measure their ecological footprint, which was taken up by about 11 congregations in the first phase.³³ Two years of 0.4 funding from Synod was made available in 2007 to continue the Ecoministry, but only to the outdoor ecofaith community.³⁴ However, some support for congregations continued. Small grants were made available from 2008 to congregations for 'eco' projects, and the Synod's General Manager of Resources requested church councils to use the church's 'Resource Guide' and to discuss 'environmental issues' at least every six months. Those grants have now ceased.

No mention of the biblical statement or the implementation of the ECP Working Group proposals appears in the Synod's annual reports. As of early 2013, the 'environment' page of the Synod website has no Synod policy or statements on it, and the new 2013–2017 Strategic Plan no longer has a 'Justice' key direction³⁵ and only speaks vaguely of addressing emerging 'key issues'.

Northern Synod

The Northern Synod is unique in the strength of partnership that exists between its two Presbyteries, namely the Northern Regional Council of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the non-indigenous Pilgrim Presbytery. This relationship affords non-indigenous members opportunities to learn from indigenous perspectives regarding country and land, which resonate particularly with stewardship and web-of-life models outlined above.

Resolutions don't play a huge role at Northern Synod meetings, where proceedings focus instead on informal dialogue. The Synod has a strongly devolved structure, in which people have the freedom to be active on the

33 Ecofaith, 'How Much Does Our Worship of the Creator cost Creation', <http://ecofaith.org/footprint>

34 The ecofaith community is still meeting, though unfunded and less often, as of early 2013.

35 Uniting Church in Australia Presbytery and Synod of South Australia, 'Strategic Plan 2013–2017', n.p., <http://sa.uca.org.au/strategic-plan/strategic-plan-2013-2017>.

issues of concern in their own local, regional or Presbytery structures. Nevertheless, the Synod formally affirmed the Assembly's 2009 *Economy of Life* statement and has continued to support the Bininj people as they pursue their demands in relation to the Ranger uranium mine at Jabiru. The Moderator and General Secretary have also provided public comment on behalf of the Synod regarding other public policy matters that relate to the connections between indigenous people and their lands. Debate in the Pilgrim Presbytery in 2009 around an unsuccessful resolution opposing uranium exploration in central Australia highlighted a diversity of views regarding the relative merits of uranium versus coal.

The Synod has encouraged the thirteen congregations within the Pilgrim Presbytery to conduct environmental audits, and some uptake has occurred. In 2012, a 25 percent social justice advocate role was established by the Pilgrim Presbytery, to resource and support networking in relation to justice and ecological matters.

The *Basis* asserts that congregations, not Synods, Assembly or Agencies, are the embodiment of the church. Certainly they are communities in which we would hope to see the church engaging in the reconciliation and renewal of Creation.

Congregations

There are some excellent examples of congregational ecological initiatives.³⁶ Some have been enabled by Synod and Assembly resourcing, and others have driven Synod action. But how pervasive are such initiatives?

The Synods and Assembly have not surveyed congregational engagement or evaluated the uptake of resources, with the exception of the 2010 WA Green Church Survey.³⁷ Anecdotally, however, staff across the VicTas, South Australian and Queensland Synods recalled an increased degree of interest and activity in the couple of years following Al Gore's 2006

36 A number are showcased in Jessica Morthorpe, Cath James, and Steve Douglas, *Greening the Church: Australian Churches Tell Their Inspirational Stories* (Melbourne: Justice and International Mission Unit, Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, 2010), <http://greenchurch.victas.uca.org.au/what-are-churches-doing/five-leaf-eco-awards/award-winning-churches/>.

37 Social Justice Board, *Green Church Survey* (Perth: Uniting Church Synod of WA, 2010), http://green.wa.uca.org.au/?page_id=56.

climate change documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth'. This was followed by an apparent decline in speaker and resource requests, possibly due to increased politicisation of the issue and/or 'green fatigue'.³⁸ However, it may also simply reflect an increased familiarity with the issues and the greater number and availability of resources for churches from the internet.

The most comprehensive data about congregational ecological activity comes from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The NCLS indicates that Uniting Church congregations are more ecologically active than congregations/parishes of other denominations, and suggests that Synod staff were correct in sensing an increased engagement through the decade. For example, in 1996 only 4 percent indicated that they had been involved in 'animal welfare or environmental activities'³⁹ in the previous twelve months, and this rose to 15 percent by 2011.⁴⁰

When asked in 2011 more specifically about twenty-one environmental activities⁴¹ that they had undertaken in the preceding five years, nearly half of UCA congregations had engaged in environmentally themed worship and just over a quarter had undertaken an environmental audit. These figures were approximately double the proportion of non-UCA congregations. Indeed in a large majority of the activities surveyed, UCA congregations were significantly more likely to have been involved. Furthermore, in the 2011 leader survey, Uniting Church ministers were much more likely to preach on environment/caring for the Earth than other ministers, with a quarter indicating that they often did so, and a further third said that they sometimes did.⁴² These survey findings indicate a relatively high degree

38 Timothy Devinney, Pat Auger, and Rosalind DeSailly, 'What Matters to Australians: Our Social, Political and Economic Values', Anatomy of Civil Societies Research Project, 2012, 39, [http://www.modern-cynic.org/SEV_Reports/AustralianReport\(31March2012\).pdf](http://www.modern-cynic.org/SEV_Reports/AustralianReport(31March2012).pdf); The Climate Institute, 'Climate of the Nation 2012: Australian Attitudes on Climate Change', 2012, <http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/climate-of-the-nation-2012.html>.

39 The NCLS consistently uses the phrase 'environmental' rather than 'ecological'.

40 Peter Kaldor, '1996 NCLS Operations Survey' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 1996); Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Operations Survey' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011).

41 Powell, '2011 NCLS Operations Survey'. The activities covered a wide range of areas of church life, including worship, church buildings and community activities. Some 458 UCA congregations completed the survey.

42 Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Leader Survey A' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011). Approximately 100 UCA ministers answered this variant of the leader survey.

of exposure of UCA congregations to environmental concerns during worship.

However, there were some activities for which the uptake was very low. Only 16 percent of congregations indicated that they had run a Bible study on an environmental theme. Low uptake of government accredited GreenPower (6 percent) is also notable, particularly for NSW/ACT (7 percent) despite the Synod having passed a resolution in 2006 requesting congregations to switch.

Of course, there are also non-ecological motivations which can result in churches taking ecological action. For example, electricity price increases may prompt more congregations to undertake energy audits or install solar panels and there are also many motivations behind community gardening. Even if ecology is not the initial motivation, participation can lead to increased ecological awareness as an outcome.⁴³

In contrast to the denominational differences observed for congregational activity, surveys across the decade of churchgoers' involvement in conservation/environment/animal welfare groups indicate that Uniting Church member involvement (4 percent for volunteering and 6–8 percent for membership) was generally not significantly higher than in other churches.⁴⁴ Uniting Church ministers were, however, highly involved in environmental groups with 25 percent reporting membership in 2012,⁴⁵ and in response to a more general survey question, 41 percent of UCA members said they were 'environmentally active' in 2011 up from 25 percent in 2006.⁴⁶

Concluding reflections

The Uniting Church's ecological engagement in the new millennium has been considerable. The church's statements and resolutions, its production of worship materials and other support resources for congregations, the

43 Miriam Pepper, 'Church-Based Community Gardening: Where Mission Meets Ecology in Local Context', *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 6, no. 2 (December 2012): 56–61.

44 Keith Castle, '2001 NCLS Attender Sample Survey I' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2001); Keith Castle, '2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2006); Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey G' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011).

45 Rodney Smith and William W. Emilsen, 'The Uniting Church in the New Millennium' survey, 2012. This is similar to the 22 percent obtained for ministers in congregational placements, from Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Leader Survey A' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2011).

46 Ruth Powell, '2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P' (Sydney: NCLS Research 2011).

activities of its congregations, its leadership in ecumenical initiatives, and the advocacy work of Synod and Assembly staff are unmatched by other denominations in this country. At the same time, there are a number of sometimes profound discontinuities and gaps in the theology and praxis of the church.

Our analysis has indicated a range of ecotheologies within the church's statements and resolutions. Dominion and stewardship appear alongside less prominent web/family of life strands. Appeals for action rely on both utilitarian and intrinsic worth arguments in the same documents. Efforts to engage the tensions and contradictions between these perspectives have been limited for a range of reasons, such as the resourcing required, and concerns about protracted discussions delaying action. There was also a view that such discussion, even if it led to the articulation of a more consistent and integrated Uniting Church ecotheology, was unlikely to spur any action.

The NCLS data imply that this theological diversity is also found in congregations, and that we may now be in a better position for a more explicit examination of ecotheological categories, at least in terms of openness among the church membership to the more marginal positions. There is considerable affirmation of the idea that non-human life has agency and importance beyond its usefulness to humans. Six day creationism seems to be becoming an increasingly minority position, perhaps allowing for a greater exploration of the models which incorporate insights from evolutionary biology, which to this time are relegated to occasional worship resources and individual theses.⁴⁷ Stronger covenanting with Congress also provides opportunities to open up ecotheological questions and perspectives that flow from an acknowledgment that Australia 'had been created and sustained by the Triune God' and that 'the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony' prior to European invasion.⁴⁸

It is not clear, however, who would take leadership in such a process of ecotheological engagement. It is not strictly within UJA's remit (being a

47 See, for example, John, 'Biocentric Theology'.

48 Uniting Church in Australia, 'Revised Preamble', Uniting Church in Australia, n.p., <http://www.assembly.uca.org.au/resources/preamble>.

policy and advocacy body), Theology and Discipleship's professed support in the mid 2000s has not been matched by dedicated time or action, and organised ecotheology courses are fast evaporating. We will return to the question of the importance of this task of reflection and engagement later.

There is uneven implementation of Assembly and Synod resolutions. By its own admission, the Uniting Church 'has failed to implement many of those (environmental policies) which call us as an organisation to action'.⁴⁹ The resolutions with perhaps the greatest follow-through have been those where the Assembly and Synods have resolved to engage in advocacy towards governments.

Given the Uniting Church's polity, it would be optimistic to anticipate that resolutions which make 'requests' to congregations and agencies of the church would receive widespread response.⁵⁰ The limitations of such resolutions are reflected in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania's repeated requests to congregations over more than thirty years to install solar hot water heaters and to address their energy consumption, and its 2007 resolution to call upon all congregations and bodies associated with the UCA to 'take immediate steps to comply with past Synod resolutions regarding reducing energy usage and energy efficiency'.⁵¹ In SA, congregations had to be repeatedly encouraged to use resources provided for environmental auditing, and in NSW/ACT few congregations took up GreenPower despite a direct request from Synod.

Even resolutions which concern operational matters over which the Assembly and Synods have more control (e.g. the ecological footprint associated with running Synod and Assembly offices and employing Synod and Assembly staff) remain largely un-implemented,⁵² except perhaps in the case of the small Northern Synod office which will soon have actioned all of the recommendations of its 2008 energy audit. It remains to be seen if the re-engagement with operational matters at the time of writing in the Assembly

49 Cath James and Jason John, *No Security Without Justice: Securing Ecological Justice, 2004 Federal Election* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, 2006), 4

50 An issue discussed at length by Steven Murray Douglas, 'Is "Green" Religion the Solution to the Ecological Crisis? A Case Study of Mainstream Religion in Australia' (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2007).

51 Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Resolution 07.4.37.4, 2007.

52 History of failed implementation is documented by Douglas, 'Is "Green" Religion the Solution to the Ecological Crisis?'

and several Synods yields more fruit. The church has never claimed to be perfect,⁵³ but it must lead by example if its prophetic voice is to be taken seriously both by those within the church and those outside of it.

Ecological activity in congregations is stronger than in other Australian denominations, and grassroots concern and commitment have at times run ahead of and brought about resourcing and commitment from institutional church structures. There are some fine examples of congregational activity, and particularly striking is that half of our congregations indicated that they usually included 'environmental concerns' in their worship. Around half also indicated that they had celebrated a day or season with an 'environmental theme' at least once between 2006 and 2011, which we expect may in part reflect exposure to the Season of Creation and to the Uniting Church's World Environment Day worship resources.

When it comes to Uniting Church members themselves, however, the distinctions between their views and actions and those of churchgoers from other denominations are not as marked. This may seem somewhat contradictory. However, congregational participation is only one influence among many in the lives of churchgoers. Moreover, the survey work doesn't tell us *how and to what extent* churches have incorporated 'environmental matters' in worship. Congregational activity that might allow a more sustained engagement may have been much more marginal, such as Bible studies on an environmental theme which were undertaken by only a sixth of congregations between 2006 and 2011.

Unfortunately, NCLS data is not able to tell us about ecological activity across the cultural breadth of the Uniting Church, because the participation of non-English speaking background (NESB) congregations in the NCLS is low. We know that UTC students from the Pacific Islands tended to enrol in ecotheology, and Korean postgraduates continue to do so. However, the little anecdotal evidence that we have about NESB congregational engagement suggests that it is lower than the UCA average. Since the future of the Uniting Church is most likely a smaller and more culturally diverse church, this raises questions for the future of ecotheological reflection and praxis.

Where public policy advocacy activity has occurred in the Assembly and the Synods, it has been dominated by climate change (in contrast to

53 See, for example, Uniting Church in Australia, 'For the Sake of the Planet', par. 3.

advocacy work prior to 2000 where uranium mining was a focus), and has often been undertaken as a part of broader civil society, ecumenical and/or occasionally multi-faith collaborations. Given the Uniting Church's legacy and history of engagement in relation to matters of human justice, the prevalence of climate change comes as no surprise, because the impacts of climate change on humans fall disproportionately on the poor and on future generations who themselves bear little responsibility for the causes.

Nevertheless, there is a gap between the advocacy work undertaken by the Assembly and Synod staff and public policy engagement among the church membership. Effectively we see a professionalization of campaigning on ecological issues with limited grassroots mobilisation. Moreover the professional advocacy work has occurred through legitimated/sanctioned advocacy processes—with the longstanding history of Christian civil disobedience remaining highly marginal. It is, however, possible that we are on the cusp of an upwelling of grassroots engagement, particularly among rural church communities who are increasingly witnessing and being affected by a rapid expansion of fossil fuel mining.

In its statements and worship resources, the Uniting Church has repeatedly proclaimed that the Earth is good, important to God in and of itself, and that God's reconciliation and renewal includes all Creation. And yet, in the face of declining membership, capacity constraints and funding cuts it is repeatedly ecological engagement which proves to be dispensable—even when it comes to implementing the church's own resolutions.

As one ecological advocate commented, 'with our words we say this is important, with our budgets we say this is not important enough'⁵⁴ and another, 'when Uniting Church people gather around the table to make decisions about where [justice] priorities lie, our first inclinations are always for social justice'.⁵⁵

In other words, although several ecotheological models coexist in Uniting Church discourse, when competing priorities arise, our lived ethic has defaulted to a human-centred, indeed even an anthropo-exclusive, position.⁵⁶

54 Clive Ayre, UCA national green church meeting, 19 November 2012.

55 Elenie Poulos, personal communication, 15 March 2013.

56 In this, the Uniting Church is no different from other mainstream churches, see Steve Douglas, 'Religious Environmentalism in the West II: Impediments to the Praxis of Christian Environmentalism in Australia', *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (July 2009): 738–51.

This brings us again to the question of the importance of the task of more concerted ecotheological reflection within the life of the Uniting Church. A praxis approach to ecological engagement doesn't necessarily take theological reflection as its departure point—instead being constituted by a cycle of action and reflection. However, in a church that is shrinking both in members and in finances, ecological engagement risks becoming increasingly marginal.

Deliberative ecotheological reflection is sorely needed lest the church's preoccupations become by default much narrower than serving, 'that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the *whole creation*' and therefore irrelevant in the face of our rapidly worsening ecological crises.

