

SYNOD 2021

SYNOD CLIMATE ACTION STRATEGY UPDATE

Proposal

The Synod note the Climate Action Strategy Update.



Uniting Church
SYNOD OF NSW & ACT

Introduction

The 2019 meeting of the Synod agreed to initiate a Synod Climate Action Strategy. Resolution 106/19S committed our church to:

- Advocate to all levels of government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Reduce our own emissions across all parts of the church
- Stand with young people in their advocacy on global warming

Our Synod leaders suggested a broad group of interested church members be involved in shaping the implementation of the resolution. In December 2019 a group of 60 church members, Synod and agency staff met to give attention to that task. At that meeting five task groups were formed as a first step in enacting the resolution and giving effect to its core elements.

This report outlines the main focus of each group and their current status. In total, more than 40 people have been involved in the task groups at some stage. Some of these are Synod or agency staff, but the majority are members of congregations who have willingly given their time and energy to this work as part of their faith, and the commitment to care for creation which flows from it. In the time since the groups have formed much has been achieved. We thank all members of the task groups for their efforts.

Synod Emissions Task Group

This group is made up largely of staff of Synod, its boards and agencies. It meets monthly. Its main areas of focus and achievement include:

- The drafting of a theology and values paper
- Exploration of the viability of solar farm investment
- Near finalisation of a Synod plan to transition to carbon neutral vehicles by 2023
- Initial development of a plan for the Synod to be net carbon neutral by 2040 (consistent with Assembly policy)
- Extensive assessment to reduce emissions in our church agency services and their supply chains is continuing
- Work on sustainable (green) buildings and embodied energy (the energy consumed by all of the processes associated with the production of a building) is also continuing

The group continues to meet under the convenorship of Daniel Andrew, Director of Operations for the Synod.

Youth Climate Actions Task Group

This group is made up of members of congregations and staff of Uniting, Synod, UME and UCA school chaplains. Miriam Pepper has convened the group though this role has been shared with others.

This group was established to provide Uniting Church support for young people's advocacy on climate change, particularly through the SchoolStrike4Climate movement. Given these events are occasional, the group's work is episodic in nature, shifting between periods of relative quiet after SS4C events and periods of intense activity in the lead up to the next event.

The group has focused on promoting and encouraging the engagement of Uniting Church members and congregations in the SS4C events of May 15th and the multiple, dispersed events and on-line action as part of the September 25 *Build our Future Not Gas* events.

For May 15th the task group helped prepare climate themed worship resources for use on the Sunday before (May 10th). Uniting Church members were encouraged to produce short video messages in support of the students. Nearly 60 videos were produced and posted. Many Uniting Church members joined in the live stream event.

There was also very active Uniting Church involvement in the September 25 events. Dozens of church members and Synod agency staff posted “Build our future not gas” selfies. More than 50 congregations displayed climate themed banners such as “Climate Emergency: God didn’t create a Planet B”. Other congregations used church notice boards to send messages of support to students. Many members also emailed or wrote to their local MP about action on global warming, or had gatherings at their MP’s electoral office.

The task group continues, and another School Strike 4 Climate event has been announced for Friday May 21.

Climate Anxiety and Pastoral Care Task Group

This group grew out of the growing concern about the mental health impacts of climate change, particularly for young people.

Jess Morthorpe and Emma Jackson were the co-chairs of a small but committed group of Uniting Church members. Over time the work expanded to include the related issue of how people can talk about climate change and creating spaces where people can share any concerns they have openly and honestly.

The group’s major project was the Climate Pastoral Care Conference held in August 2020. The conference, which was held entirely on Zoom due to COVID 19, was a great success.

Around 190 people participated over the sessions across three days. Keynote speakers included social researcher Rebecca Huntley, who shared her research on talking about climate change and Rev Dr Stephen Robinson, who reflected on his experience of the bushfires as a chaplain and emergency responder. Overall there were 21 speakers and 11 workshops covering pastoral care, anxiety, climate communication and climate action.

The conference attracted participants from across Australia and some from New Zealand and the US. While 42% of participants were from the Uniting Church they also came from other churches and the wider community. Feedback showed 95% of participants rated the conference as very good to excellent.

Alongside this major project, the Task Group also produced some resources including one on *Kids and Creation* and a reflective video on climate anxiety. Their major resource was *A Climate Conversation Guide* based on the work of Joanna Macy. It outlines a reflective group process to build awareness of the emotional and mental health impacts of climate change. The resource was trialed at the Climate Pastoral Care Conference and task group members explored using it within their own congregations. It has been shared with United Theological College for use in its courses and formation of Ministry agents. It has also been offered to chaplains in our UC schools.

This task group has now come to an end. This is partly due to losing members because of changed work and family commitments but also because remaining members felt they had largely achieved what they had set out to do.

Church and Individual Emissions Task Group

This group has been chaired by Jon O'Brien in the Uniting Advocacy team but otherwise is made up of congregational members. The group's focus is on encouraging Uniting Church congregations and members and their households to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The plan was to achieve this through promotion of the Five Leaf Eco Awards (congregations) and the Living the Change Program (individuals/households). COVID 19 meant many congregations were not meeting face to face for some time, so the primary focus has been on promoting Living the Change.

The group has:

- Drafted a series of articles for Weekly Insights on-line on steps individuals and congregations can take to reduce emissions
- Developed a simple Emissions Reductions booklet looking at behavioural changes church members can make in diet, energy use and transport to reduce emissions.
- Promoted a Living the Change discussion process and trialled this at Pitt Street Uniting, Christian Students Uniting and Northmead Uniting
- With the Synod Communications team, run a social media campaign promoting Living the Change and the [Fight for Planet A carbon counter](#)
- Organised a Solar Panel Information Evening for Uniting Church members. Nearly 80 people attended this online event (February 23 this year) which featured an introduction by the Moderator and a presentation by the Clean Energy Council

Currently the future of the group is uncertain as some members have withdrawn (due to other demands) and others consider they have done as much as they can at this stage.

Advocacy Task Group

This group has been convened by Belinda Noble from Uniting and is made up of Synod agency staff and members of congregations. The group has met every six weeks approximately.

The group's main achievements have been:

- Promotion to congregations of the Cities Power Partnership (CPP) program where local councils work with their communities, business and other groups to promote renewable energy use and other strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This has involved mapping councils involved with the CPP and encouraging congregations to approach those not involved, to join.
- Development of communications and messaging plan for the Synod Climate Action Strategy (SCAS)
- Development of media releases in support of the Cities Power Partnership program, the SS4C events on May 15th and promotion of the Climate Pastoral Care Conference, and drafting opinion pieces on the SCAS
- Working with the Moderator to identify additional Synod Climate spokespeople. The aim is to support the Moderator's work in the public sphere and strengthen the voice of the Synod on climate and represent different regions/groups within the Synod. An initial first group of (8) received spokesperson training in March 2021.
- Liaison with Tear Fund and Common Grace regarding the Together for Climate campaign (focussing on church members lobbying their local Federal MP in targeted electorates)
- Distribution of 50 climate banners with climate strategy messages to 48 congregations for the September 25 "Build our Future Not Gas" event

- Promoting and supporting engagement of members and congregations in the Sacred People Sacred Earth initiative- a global multi faith event on March 11, to sound the alarm on climate change. There were 140 events across Australia including by 15 congregations in our Synod and 29 UCA congregations across Australia (comprising nearly 7% of all actions globally).

Postscript:

The Synod Climate Strategy *Future Directions* conference was held on Saturday, March 20. Despite the terrible weather around 45 people came in person with another 40 or so joining on line. The aim of the conference was to shape the next phase of the Synod Climate Action Strategy. The keynote address from Chris Gambian, Chief Executive of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, affirmed our church's speaking about and acting on climate change as part of our care for creation. We heard and learned more from a series of eight workshops, some of which showcased practical action, with others highlighting the perspectives and concerns of First Nations people; Pacific Islanders and; young people in, responding to climate change.

The final session distilled learning from the talks and workshop discussions into key themes for future action. These included:

- Taking bolder action consistent with our values, both in advocacy to government and reducing our own emissions
- Building community across differences – whether of age, culture or location. This requires purposefully listening to and finding common ground with those with different views- including communities now dependent on fossil fuels.
- Supporting diversity in leadership on climate action – especially promoting the voices and perspectives of our Pacific Islander communities, First Nation's peoples and our youth - in both awareness raising within and advocacy beyond Uniting and the wider church.
- Building our capacity to act and deepening our engagement with congregations and communities. Identifying and resourcing local climate action leaders who can engage and mobilise others, is a crucial first step.

More work will be done in coming weeks to reflect on what came out of the conference and develop a more complete plan for the next phase of the Synod Climate Action Strategy. Look out for further developments and ways you can be involved in this work that matters for us all. To find out more you can contact members of the Uniting Advocacy team at: advocacy@uniting.org

Prepared by the Uniting Advocacy team, March 2021