

CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

This statement is an internal document and reflects the position of the ACC. Undoubtedly there will be instances that will arise where you need to consider how to practically apply the below statement. In such instances we would encourage you to seek formal advice, specific to the situation you are considering.

Overview

The exponential growth of human populations and the subsequent industrial and technological development has had an unprecedented impact upon the natural environment, causing the extinction of species, deforestation, and garbage and pollutants in oceans and landmasses. Environmental destruction impacts human communities, since it depletes the quality and quantity of natural resources that are essential to human flourishing. Likewise, the global issues of ozone depletion and climate change require engagement by Christian thinkers to ensure the threat to both human and natural ecosystems is addressed.

Christian faith understands the earth and its natural ecosystem to be created by God and thus inherently valuable – even sacred. As such, care for the natural environment is not an incidental or merely practical issue, but an essentially spiritual issue as well. While the church has sometimes been guilty of prioritising the spiritual over and against the natural, it is increasingly aware of the need for a more holistic faith and mission, one that cares for the whole person, body and soul, and for the whole of God’s creation in all its wondrous biological diversity.

The ACC accepts its responsibility to inform its members on both current social realities and social responsibility surrounding the environment, in order for the local church community to engage in the stewardship, care and development of their local environment. Furthermore, the immediacy of news and discussion about global issues and crises, along with the growing and public secular concern for our environment, requires the ACC to remain current in their understanding of, and addressing these concerns.

Relevant Information Regarding Current Social Opinion

There is general agreement that the expansion of human communities has had a radical impact upon the environment of every continent of the earth. Likewise, Australians recognise that we need to do a better job than we have in the past to ensure that we minimise our impact upon species and the ecologies in which we live.

There is some debate about the nature, extent, and long-term consequences of human activity on the climate. Some argue that climate change is an unproven theory, although there is general scientific agreement that human-caused global warming poses a substantial threat. There also remain some tensions as to how to balance economic growth and development with environmental protection. However, there is increasing awareness that human well-being is intimately connected to the health of the environment within which we live, as shown by the link between environmental destruction and poverty.

The tension between economic forces and environmentalism is likewise apparent in various responses to farming and the treatment of animals. While most people recognise our responsibility to minimise pain and suffering, there is widespread debate about how best to manage the animals used for food production and entertainment.

Theological Basis for the Movement's Position

The scriptures open with an affirmation of God as the Creator of the universe. The creation account tells of the glory and beauty of the entire creation, with particular emphasis given to the goodness of the oceans and sea creatures, the air and birdlife, and the diversity of gardens and animals of every kind. While not divine, creation is given a sacred status (Genesis 1).

While humanity is declared to be in the image of God, they are still a "creature", and their well-being is intimately connected to the entire ecology. An important dimension of the notion of image of God is that humans are given "dominion" over the created order. Dominion is not the right to use and abuse the earth, but delegated stewardship; a charge by God to care for that which belongs to God and which He declares to be good. God's love and care for the earth and its creatures is a common theme of the Christian scriptures (Genesis 6:19-20, Psalm 104:14-21, Isaiah 35:1-2, Matthew 6:26-29 etc.).

One of the consequences of human sin (see Genesis 3, Romans 8:20-21) is our failure to live up to our responsibilities, and this includes our negative effect on the environment. The incarnation of Jesus and His message of the good news of the Kingdom of God embraces not only human souls, but our bodies, our social communities, and the environments in which we live. The message of the Kingdom includes the reconciliation and restoration of all creation. The gospel of Jesus Christ opposes sin and evil in all its manifestations, including the evils done against our oceans, forests, and wild and domestic animals. As Paul observes, "creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... [it] has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:19,22).

In the light of these theological underpinnings, the Australian Christian Churches offers the following perspectives:

i. Environmental Care

We view caring for the environment to be an important responsibility for all people, including the Church. As a community of people filled with the Spirit, the Church is called to embody in its own practices care of the environment, and to work with the broader community in an effort to redress past environmental abuses, and reshape our economies and technologies for the sake of our children and the world in which they will live.

Of particular importance is the need to challenge the ideology of consumption that predominates in capitalist societies and that drives our usage (and often exploitation) of the world's natural

resources. The message of the Kingdom of God seeks to replace the self-serving motives that are too often central to modern economies with virtues of self-sacrifice, humility, faith, hope, and love. That Christians are called to be hopeful means that we don't give up in the face of seemingly intractable environmental issues. That we are called to be faithful means that we commit ourselves to the task of being stewards of God's good creation. That we are called to love means that we embrace that which is too often neglected and forgotten—not least the environment (particularly animals) that have borne the brunt of our environmental sin.

ii. Climate change

We recognise that human activity over history has contributed to our climate and environment. We accept that the general scientific consensus is that climate change poses a threat to environmental and social systems. While the Church itself has no claim to expertise in this field, we commit to work with the broader society in its systemic efforts to reduce the negative impact of humans on the environment. We support all efforts to improve the environment, i.e. advocating for clean water, better air quality and pollution reduction.

iii. Animal welfare

We view animals as being created by God, and recognise that they are deserving of our care. This includes caring for the environments in which they live, and treating domesticated animals well.

There is an obvious qualitative difference between humans and other animals, and only humans are made in the image of God. As such, the Bible makes it clear that vegetation and animals are available for human food and use (Gen. 1:28-30, Gen. 9:1-5). We therefore value the contribution of farmers to our society, and affirm their right to grow produce and husband animals for our consumption. At the same time, we know that sentient animals can suffer physically and psychologically to varying degrees, and that the unnecessary cause of animal suffering is a sin before God. Human interaction with animals, especially farming, should pursue methods that ensure pain and suffering is minimised and welfare increased.

Pastoral Questions

Whilst Christian pastors and leaders should prioritise the human soul, they should not neglect a holistic gospel message that anticipates the renewal of creation. The scriptures give humanity a God-given place in the created order, that is, to steward and tend the earth and bring it to its full potential.

Christian churches should teach on the importance of the environment and human responsibility for care the earth. They should also embody this teaching by careful and creative use of their own resources: minimising resource consumption, reducing carbon outputs, recycling, designing eco-friendly buildings and the like. They should also seek opportunities for involvement with their local communities in environmental projects, thus integrating practical environmental work into the mission of the Church. This is not to suggest that churches engage in environmental work simply as a strategy to win converts, but to affirm that the good news of Jesus is most fully proclaimed in word and deed.

Pentecostal churches have sometimes been criticised for their emphasis on prosperity, which seems to be aligned with the economics of consumption. The ACC understands prosperity by reference not to money and spending, but to flourishing and well-being. This is a much broader notion, which takes into account physical, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, and environmental flourishing. It

recognises that the good news of the gospel involves the Church working with the Spirit toward the well-being of the world in all its dimensions, including the health of the earth and its creatures.

Summary of Position

The 21st century presents human society with environmental challenges the likes of which have never before been encountered. Extinction of species, destruction of habitats, pollution of land, air, and water, as well as the global threat of climate change, stand together as one of the central moral challenges of the present age. It is thus imperative that the Christian Church play its part in helping to sustain a healthy environment for future generations. This will be achieved, first, by preaching and teaching about our responsibility as people created in God's image to care for the environment that is loved by God, and second, by incorporating practical creation care activities into the mission of the Church.

