

# VIEWPOINT

Volume 4, Issue 1, Spring 2021

A magazine of the Canberra Region Presbytery of the Uniting Church in Australia  
Online copy at [canberra.uca.org.au](http://canberra.uca.org.au)

**WELCOME** to the first issue of *Viewpoint* magazine since the pandemic. Canberra Region Presbytery looks forward to publishing *Viewpoint* online on a regular basis after the hiatus of the last year.

Our theme for this issue is **Advocacy**. Advocacy essentially means bearing witness to the truth, which is the primary agenda of the Christian Gospel, as Christ explained to Pontius Pilate (John 18:37). The rather bored and impatient look on Pilate's face in the painting below captures the perennial difficulty of advocating to powers who would rather not listen!

Advocacy work in Canberra Region Presbytery bears witness in a variety of ways, as our church reflects on the moral priorities our society should address. Articles in this issue discuss advocacy activities within our Presbytery, for climate, for social justice, for refugees, for service delivery, for drug law reform, and ecumenical work with the ACT Churches Council. Others explain the Biblical basis for advocacy, why justice is central to the faith of Christ. We also have some poetry.

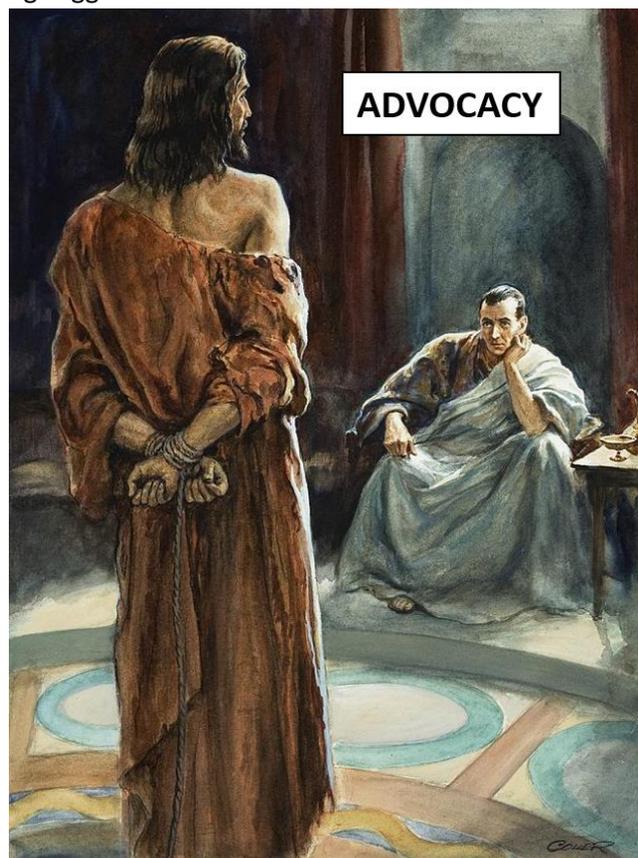
Please let me know any thoughts you might have on this issue. Your input to future issues of *Viewpoint* would be greatly appreciated, including suggestions for themes and content.

The Presbytery meeting online on Saturday 21 August will reflect on the advocacy themes discussed here.

Our prayers are with everyone affected by the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic. Our Christian faith calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves. One of the most important ways we can show our love today by caring for each other in this time of pandemic is to ensure that we and our families are fully vaccinated. Vaccination massively reduces the risk of catching and spreading the virus, and the severity of symptoms. We can pray that high rates of vaccination will enable us to return to fellowship in person.

In Christ

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*Christ In Front Of Pontius Pilate* by Henry Coller

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### **Social Justice Activities of Canberra Uniting Church Congregations, by PSJG**

What do Canberra congregations of the Uniting Church do by way of social justice activities? What would they like to do? How could social justice activities be better promoted in congregations and in the Presbytery? To find answers to these questions, the Presbytery Social Justice Group (PSJG) has undertaken a survey of Canberra congregations. Commencing in late 2019, surveys were conducted by face-to-face meetings, with a member of PSJG interviewing a representative(s) of a congregation. The PSJG interviewer wrote up the results which were cleared with the interviewee.

In the event, bushfires, smoke and COVID as well as personal illness disrupted the survey. 11 surveys were undertaken, about half of them in late 2019/early 2020 and the remainder in late 2020. At that point, PSJG decided not to survey any more congregations but to compile and analyse the results of the 11, recognising that these in fact constituted a large sample of Canberra congregations. Here is what the survey revealed.

#### **Q1. What activities to promote social justice has your congregation or members of your congregation been involved in during the last 12 months?**

- Congregations engage in a wide and rich diversity of social justice activities. Most of these activities could be described as social services or community support activities. Many members of congregations are involved as volunteers in these activities but in some cases so too are people not otherwise involved in the church. Some activities involve many volunteers and much management effort. Two activities involve paid employees and government funding.

*Examples of social service and community support services provided by Canberra UCA congregations*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early morning centre</li> <li>• Prisoner visiting and support</li> <li>• Food pantry and hampers, cash vouchers</li> <li>• Second-hand clothes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Men’s shed</li> <li>• Seniors’ activities</li> <li>• Community garden</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for women’s refuge</li> <li>• Support for drug and alcohol centre</li> <li>• Disability accommodation and support</li> <li>• Housing refugee family in church manse</li> <li>• Supporting international students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Craft activities/fairs, morning teas and book stalls to support people in need</li> <li>• Walking group</li> <li>• Hall rental concessions for community groups</li> <li>• Music centre</li> <li>• Street library</li> <li>• Community carols</li> </ul>
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- Congregations donate many \$10,000s to a wide range of causes. Some are within the UCA eg Frontier Services, Moderator’s appeals and UnitingWorld. Many are outside, including refugee and other Canberra charities and overseas aid organisations and Christian missions.
- Most congregations are involved in advocacy, including attendance at rallies, letter writing and signage. Overall, however these activities are much less significant than social services etc. Advocacy is focussed on refugees, Indigenous issues including the Uluru Statement, climate change, homelessness and drug law reform. These align well with priority issues identified by Uniting Justice and the Synod Social Justice Forum. On the other hand, few congregations appear to draw much on Synod or Assembly social justice resources or local resources like [Christians for an Ethical Society](#).
- Many members of the congregations surveyed are active in social justice activities in organisations outside the church.
- In two of the congregations many members are not comfortable with political advocacy. In these congregations, social justice activities are focussed on social service and community support. These congregations were also more likely to report evangelical mission activities.
- All congregations surveyed mention social justice activities on their website or on Facebook. There are gaps however, and the overall impression, with regard to electronic media at least, is that on social justice we tend to hide our light under a bushel.
- About half of the congregations surveyed offer occasional educational or information sessions (eg on refugee situation or how to use less plastic). A few congregations have social justice or environment groups. There was little mention of organised discussion about social justice itself, its meaning, underpinning in theology and connection with our faith.
- Some congregations hold Sunday services with a social justice theme (typically about creation or the environment). But few mentioned [observance of Social Justice Sunday](#) or have developed liturgies especially for a social justice theme.

**Q2. Are there social justice activities that you would like to see your congregation doing in the future?**

Almost all congregations have ideas about future activities. Climate change, refugees, Indigenous issues and homelessness are prominent but other areas were also nominated (eg poverty, prisoners, violence against women, LGBTQI issues, stronger connection with local community). Few congregations appear to have developed these ideas in a planning context or set priorities. Ideas for the future do not appear to include encouraging congregation members to participate in social justice activities or to reflect on the place of social justice in Christian faith and practice.

**Q3. Have you any suggestions about how social justice can be better promoted at either a local congregation or Presbytery level?**

There was a view that congregations are not well connected with each other or with Presbytery and Synod in their social justice activities. In part this is because congregations are not talking with each

other and not accessing available material such as from the Social Justice Forum. It was thought too that Presbytery and PSJG could play a stronger integrating and leadership role.

## Conclusions

- What congregations are doing, especially in the areas of social service and community support, is enormously encouraging and a sign of the vitality of congregational life and the faith of members.
- Advocacy seems underdone. For some people political advocacy is contrary to their understanding of the faith although this did not seem to be the case in most of the congregations surveyed. Many people, however, do find advocacy difficult or are unsure about it. Given the importance of social justice in the sense of “speaking out” in the founding documents and continuing mission of the Uniting Church we would encourage Presbytery and congregations to think more about the place of advocacy. This should include how best to support members active in social justice organisations outside the church.

*“Any consideration of the place of advocacy would best be part of a wider discussion - at the congregation and Presbytery level - about the Biblical and theological basis for social justice and its place in Christian life.”*

*[Given the results of the survey it is encouraging that a pick-up has been observed over the past year or so in advocacy activity by Canberra congregations and in the use of social justice themes in worship.]*

- Any consideration of the place of advocacy would best be part of a wider discussion - at the congregation and Presbytery level - about the Biblical and theological basis for social justice and its place in Christian life.
- Congregations are not drawing as much as they could on social justice material offered by Synod and the Assembly or from other churches and organisations with similar social justice aims such as the [material produced annually by the Catholic Bishops for Social Justice Sunday](#). Presbytery might consider a greater role here in raising awareness of this material and encouraging its use.
- Congregations need to be better at letting others know about their social justice activities, by putting more information on websites, social media, and signage.
- There is much to be said for congregations talking more amongst themselves about what each is doing in the social justice area and of the potential for acting together on new projects.
- The apparent absence of much planning for future social justice activities may be a reflection of the state of congregation planning generally but it is a truism that if we don’t plan well for these activities they will be less effectively prosecuted.
- Meeting in a coffee shop proved to be a good way of going about the survey. People enjoyed the conversation, (it did not seem to be a chore) talking about their church, giving opinions and, hearing about what was happening in other congregations and in the broader church.
- All supporters are welcome to join the PSJG in its regular online meetings. For details please contact PSJG Convenor Evan Mann at [evan.mann@netspeed.com.au](mailto:evan.mann@netspeed.com.au)

**Presbytery Social Justice Group  
August 2021**

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## Advocacy for drug law reform – the role of Canberra Region Presbytery and NSW/ACT Synod, by Marion McConnell (OAM) and Bill Bush

The [Fair Treatment campaign](#) of the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church through its social justice, community services and chaplaincy arm, Uniting NSW ACT, reflects the church's strong commitment to reach out to those on the margins of society. Drawing on its prophetic tradition, the existence of unjust structures has compelled the church to speak out about the need for drug law reform.

The Synod came to this point after a quarter of a century of discernment both internally and in discussion with other organisations. In this process the Canberra Region Presbytery has played a leading role. It is a story of committed, informed and persistent advocacy. As members of St Ninian's Uniting Church, the Presbytery Social Justice Group and the community organisation Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, we have been part of it. We are pleased to tell that story here.

In June 1996, the St Ninians Council of Elders wrote to the Canberra Region Presbytery, asking it to get behind the proposed ACT Heroin Trial. The following year, the then East Belconnen Uniting Church encouraged one of its members, the late Prof Max Neutze, to write a [paper for Zadok](#) on a Christian perspective on that trial.

The heroin trial was rejected by the Commonwealth government of the day. Over the ensuing years there was intermittent interest by Presbytery in drug law reform issues. Then in 2014 the Presbytery Social Justice Group (PSJG) was re-established and in 2015 it nominated drug law reform as its highest priority. It was supported by Presbytery which in turn urged Synod to take up the issue. With the strong support of Rev Myung Hwa Park the then Moderator, and Peter Worland the then Executive Director of Uniting Care, the issue was taken up by the Social Justice Forum (SJF) under Jon O'Brien. He invited the two of us to present at the SJF in December 2015. We subsequently addressed the 2016 Synod together with Marianne Jauncey, Medical Director of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Sydney.

***“Drawing on its prophetic tradition, the existence of unjust structures has compelled the church to speak out about the need for drug law reform.”***

There was much excitement when a few days later the Synod released the following statement to the media:

“The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW and the ACT, at its recent Synod meeting has given the go-ahead for its services and congregations to call for:

- Increased investment in harm reduction and demand reduction strategies; and
- Further measures to decriminalise individual possession of small amounts of illegal drugs (not to decriminalise the illegal supply of drugs).”

Synod then moved quickly and asked Uniting to lead a campaign for reform of drug law and policy in NSW and the ACT. The campaign would draw upon the considerable experience and expertise of people working in the field, including medical staff at the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Sydney.

The campaign began with information sharing. Manuel Cardoso, a key figure behind Portugal's 2001 decriminalisation of personal drug use and the shift of resources into treatment, spoke to an audience which packed St Stephen's Uniting Church in June 2018. The occasion gave Marion the opportunity to speak from the floor in favour of the campaign. The Canberra Drug Policy Series - a partnership between Uniting, the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Association in the ACT (ATODA) and the ANU School of Sociology - brought international speakers, cutting-edge ideas and stimulating conversations to the city. Sir Richard Branson launched the Fair Treatment Campaign to a capacity crowd at the Sydney Town Hall in October 2018. The launch was followed by the [Long Walk to Treatment](#) with 100 people walking from Dubbo to the NSW Parliament at Macquarie St to highlight the alarming gaps in services for people seeking drug and alcohol treatment in rural and remote communities. The *Long Walk* was made into a powerful and moving film – [Half a Million Steps](#) - telling the personal stories behind a movement to reform drug laws and policy and make treatment available to all.

Uniting now has over 60 partnering organisations who have joined the campaign. They continue to lobby politicians and appear to have been influential in the NSW government allocating \$7.5 million towards a detoxification and residential rehabilitation facility in its 2020-21 budget. Uniting Churches and other organisations in regional centres are inviting Uniting to bring the campaign to their towns.

The NSW/ACT Synod and the Fair Treatment campaign of Uniting are to be congratulated for the way they have advocated for change to our ill-conceived drug laws and for better treatment. Through this advocacy our Uniting Church has listened to its own people, connected with other organisations, spent time in discernment and moved out amongst communities to bring God's love, understanding, healing and justice to those who are hurting. We are proud and energised to be a member of such a church. As Zadok showed 25 years ago in choosing to publish about the heroin trial, so the Uniting Church has shown a "commitment to exploring and promoting Christian ethical engagements with the world beyond Sunday's sometimes cloistered walls into the Monday world where God's scattered people engage everyday life, work, leisure, politics, environment."

There are so many good and professional people within the Uniting Church and Uniting who have made this campaign possible. We have mentioned some; we wish we could name you all here. You all have an incredibly special place in our hearts.

### Marion McConnell (OAM) and Bill Bush

Marion McConnell and Bill Bush are longstanding members of St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham ACT, (Marion for 50 years) and members of the Presbytery Social Justice Group. Marion is a founding member (1996) of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform and Bill a member for almost as long.



The Long Walk to Treatment campaign reached NSW Parliament House in 2018, delivering a message to politicians that the war on drugs is lost and we need drug law reform now. (From [Insights Magazine](#))

## **Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, by Rev Dr John Squires**

*“Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20)*

So we read in scripture. And once they were in that land (even though they colonised it unjustly), the people of Israel were reminded of the centrality of justice. “What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”, one prophet asked (Micah 6:8). “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”, another of the prophets declared (Amos 5:24).

Justice is an important and oft-recurring theme in scripture, in both Old and New Testaments. It is not an add-on, an optional extra. Justice sits at the centre of the scriptural witness.

### **1 Jesus and Justice**

When one of the evangelists told the story of Jesus, the person chosen by God for a special task, he related him to the words (from yet another prophet) in which God affirmed, “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles ... a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory” (Matt 12:18–20, quoting Isaiah 42:1–4).

Jesus himself had made it clear that when his focus was on fulfilling all the Law (Matt 5:17–20), it was “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” that ought to be given priority (Matt 23:23). So, when Jesus instructs his followers to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33), he is pointing to the centrality of justice in the ways of God. And when he affirms that “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are blessed, “for they shall be satisfied” (Matt 5:6), he is placing justice at the centre of his message. The Greek word translated here as “righteousness” can equally be translated as “justice”.

### **2 The Justice [Righteousness] of God**

The letters of Paul place this justice (“righteousness”) at the heart of the gospel he proclaimed: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness [justice] of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous [the just] shall live by faith.’” (Rom 1:16–17).

Justice [righteousness] is the very essence of God, given as an act of grace to all who put trust in God. It is through this “righteousness [justice] of God, through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”, that “all are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:21–26). Paul asserts that it is “one act of righteousness [justice] [which] leads to justification and life for all” so that “grace also might reign through righteousness [justice] leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 5:18–21). Justice is the very essence of God, given to all through Jesus.

**“Advocating for justice is thus seen as integral to faith in God.”**

### **3 Justice and Grace**

One way of expressing this quality of justice, or righteousness, in the life of faith, is to show grace, or compassion, to those who are in need. Jesus recognised this when he affirmed “whoever gives a cup of water to drink” (Mark 9:41), and in his parable about the Samaritan who went out of his way to assist and care for an injured traveller (Luke 10:25–37).

Jesus declares his intention to enact justice in both the manifesto for mission that Luke highlights at the start of his public activity (Luke 4:18–21) and the climactic parable of the sheep and the goats that Matthew places at the end of his public teaching (Matt 25:31–46). He calls for setting free the captives, giving sight to the blind, and liberating the oppressed (Luke 4:18). He tells his followers that whenever they sheltered the homeless, fed the hungry, or gave a drink to the thirsty, “you did it to me” (Matt 25:35–40). James, his brother, likewise asserted that to practice true religion was “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27).

So acts of kindness give expression to the very heart of who God is, by manifesting God’s justice, or righteousness. “Unless your righteousness [justice] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”, he declares (Matt 5:20), and so “blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness [justice], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:10).

#### 4 Advocating for Justice in Scripture

Taking care that justice is done also requires speaking out for those who are silenced, marginalised, oppressed, or persecuted. In Proverbs, the sage advised, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov 31:8–9). The Psalmist affirmed, “Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him” (Psalm 41:1).

Advocating for justice is thus seen as integral to faith in God.

One of the prophets delivered the word of the Lord: “Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart” (Zech 7:9). Another prophet asserted, “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed” (Isa 56:1).

Jesus is remembered in the preaching of his followers as The Righteous One—we might also say, The Just One. This is what he is called by Peter (Acts 3:14), Stephen (Acts 7:52), and Paul (Acts 22:14). The title recalls the centrality of justice in the ministry of Jesus.

And Jesus maintains the importance of advocating for justice in his teachings. We have already noted his teachings in which he advocates that we care for the little ones and those in need (Matt 25) and instructs his followers to work for liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4). He teaches the central significance of love for neighbour (Mark 12:31), which surely entails advocating for justice.

And he tells the parable of the widow calling persistently for justice (Luke 18:1–8), which concludes with the powerful rhetorical question, “will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?” (Luke 18:7). This is followed by the striking affirmation, “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily” (Luke 18:8). A commitment to justice requires advocacy for justice.

#### 5 Justice in the Uniting Church Basis of Union

The centrality of justice, so evident in the witness of scripture, is reiterated in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church. If we are followers of Jesus, called to walk the way he sets out before us, then as faithful



**Poem – Rainbow Snake**

The Rainbow Snake is alive today  
So hey brother, now sister,  
Where do you come from?  
Your back is scarred but not yet broken.  
Hey brother, now sister,  
Remember where you’re from.  
The rivers, trees and starry sky  
Say get back to the land.  
The deserts cry, the mountains sigh  
Your heart is in the land.

*Robbie Tulip*

disciples, we are called to walk right into what the Basis of Union envisages as a “new order of righteousness and love” (para 3). The words in that phrase are drawn from the deep wells of tradition, especially in scripture, where both love and righteousness are frequently occurring words. It is the kingdom of God which is the new order of righteousness (justice), manifested in love.

These words call us to care for one another but also to do what is right. They call us to live a life grounded in justice, in the same terms that Jesus and the prophets before him cried out, seeking justice for everyone—not just for ourselves or those close to us, but for the whole of society.

These words challenge us to live with the same self-giving, fully-emptying love, that we see in the cross at the centre of the story of Jesus. And they lead us to the conclusion that as we live in this way, we will advocate for justice.

## 6 Advocating for Justice in the Statement to the Nation

The Uniting Church inherited from its predecessor Churches this resolutely firm commitment to advocating for justice for all. Many Uniting Church congregations and members are actively committed to serving those people who find themselves on the margins of society. This commitment was clearly articulated in the 1977 Statement to the Nation, which declared, “We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur.”

That Statement then identified specific forms of injustice: “poverty, racism and discrimination, acquisitiveness and greed, and the daily widening gap between the rich and poor”. It identified a number of rights to be supported: “equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available”.

It also noted some just actions that were to be followed, including “the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth’s resources”, as well as “a concern for the welfare of the whole human race”.

The Statement spoke out publicly about these matters. It models for future Uniting Church people the importance of advocating for justice.

## 7 Advocating for Justice in Action

This commitment to advocating for justice has been evident in many actions undertaken by Uniting Church members over the decades. The Uniting Church has joined in common cause with other groups and organisations in society, in standing in covenant solidarity with First Peoples; in advocating for a welcoming attitude towards refugees; in lobbying for a fair and just system of caring for people who are experiencing poverty and homelessness; in seeking equity for workers in their workplace; and in many other issues. A regular stream of policy documents and public resolutions point to a clear and unbroken commitment to seeking justice for all.

“Justice, and only justice, you shall follow.” The words of the ancient prophet sound clear, still, today. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” has become a compelling guide for people of faith. And as we walk the way of The Just One, we do well to “seek first the kingdom of God and God’s justice”.

For the Basis of Union, see <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union>.

For the Statement to the Nation, see <https://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/134-statement-to-the-nation-inaugural-assembly-june-1977>.

For policy documents and Assembly resolutions on matters of justice, see the many resources collected at <https://unitingjustice.org.au>

Rev Dr John Squires is Minister Wellbeing of Canberra Region Presbytery and editor of [With Love to the World](#). He blogs on ‘An Informed Faith’ at <https://johntsquires.com/>

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## Thinking Beyond the Individual and the Imperative for Human Evolution: A Christian Response to Climate Change, by Katy Nicholls

On a wet and very chilly Canberra night 35 people gathered at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture to listen to Bishop George Browning (former Anglican Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn) and Dr David Hunter (President, Orthopterists' Society and adviser to the Asia Development Bank) speak to Christians for an Ethical Society on climate change and the Christian moral imperative to act for the common good.

Bishop George's presentation, titled *"Is it just me", asked the frog, "or is the water getting warmer"*, called for an evolution in humanity. Humanity is tribal, he stated, and the consequent tribal conquering and subduing was necessary for survival until the last few centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century the most harmful manifestation of tribalism is nationalism, with terrible violent results for humanity and for the integrity of the world's ability to support us. However, for our own survival, it is "dawning on us that exploitation and consumerism is a feature of human irresponsible adolescence". "The planet will survive without us", he said, adding, "we will not survive without a healthy, richly diverse, planet". "Circumstance is forcing humanity to grow up and as we grow up, we learn there is a better, more satisfying, less alienating, less violent way forward. This has of course always been the Christian view, what we might call the soul of humanity is infinitely more important than the trinkets with which we like to distract ourselves."

Bishop George called for a change in human relationships – to that of community and planetary citizenship. He pointed out that this tipping point for humanity should not come as a surprise to Christians, it is the evolutionary change that Christ wrought in and for us. "We have been provided with a rhythm, a sabbath rhythm of rest and renewal which we have largely or totally ignored". The true goal of being a Christian and growing up as a species is "rediscovered through embracing the limitations that all life-giving relationships demand. To live harmoniously with others, with the natural order, indeed with oneself, is to discover again one's appropriate place."

The coronavirus pandemic has started us on this path, as we recognise again the value of community, the benefits of 'socialist' support for the vulnerable and that we are only as strong as the weakest link. "The year of covid has taught us that economies cannot only survive, but flourish when the emphasis is placed on social health and cohesion rather than consumerism."

He concluded by canvassing the implications for individuals, the economy and politics of the current human and climatic tipping point:

- As individuals, we must all act for good that is common – what we hold in common is infinitely more significant than any wealth we may possess as an individual. Further, all of us must adopt a carbon neutral position at home, work or play, now, and as far as we can in our circumstances.
- Economic management must abandon the illusions of neoliberal claims: "unredeemed, neo-liberal capitalism will destroy the planet this century unless it is reformed". These illusions include the belief that privatisation is necessarily good, that wealth trickles down and that regulation should be avoided. As a regulatory example he pointed out that it is reasonable to assume that the damage done by a business in the course of its operation should be the subject of reparation, yet our government refuses to impute the global and accelerating cost of releasing CO<sub>2</sub> to the cost of fossil fuel production or use.

*Bishop George called for a change in human relationships – to that of community and planetary citizenship.... this tipping point ... is the evolutionary change that Christ wrought in and for us.... "To live harmoniously with others, with the natural order, indeed with oneself, is to discover again one's appropriate place."*

- He expressed distress at the extreme tribalism currently visible in Australia’s political system, and called for a stronger global view, and the end of private funding of political parties.

Finally, there was a call of hope, that the younger generation seem to be more aware of humanity’s actions and the consequences of our current path, and that globally those in power are starting to see that we need to change, to choose planetary citizenship. As Christians, in this change we will “rediscover the mission for which we were born and in which we will rediscover our delight.”

In reply, Dr Hunter spelled out both the moral imperative for Christians to act to address climate change for the common good, and the scientific evidence that there are ways and means to meet that obligation.

He summarised the current global political and scientific information, from the recent statement of the UN Secretary General that the world is reaching the point of no return on climate change to a summary of some of the worrying tipping points. These include those arising from the temperatures in the Arctic having risen by 4-5 degrees: the melting of Arctic ice results in an ocean that absorbs rather than reflects sunlight and heat and there is also a consequent more rapid melting of permafrost, releasing methane, a potent greenhouse gas, which will lead to runaway melting of glaciers and potentially the Greenland ice sheet. The consequences for humans range from sea level rise to changed rainfall patterns globally disrupting food production, to the replacement of many temperate forests by subtropical forests with the replacement occurring by fire. Already insurance premiums in zones at risk are becoming unaffordable.



Speakers on climate and faith at Christians for an Ethical Society forum on 9 June 2021:  
(L) Anglican Bishop George Browning,  
(R) Dr David Hunter

On the other hand, global leaders are starting to recognise the risks and act more seriously, and Australian state governments and companies are increasingly investing in renewable electricity, including for export to Singapore.

He concluded with a call for a recognition of individual responsibility to do our part in personal action in reducing our footprint and in advocacy, and a paraphrase of the words of Moses “I set before YOU this day a choice: and this is that choice: do right for the good of us here in Australia and for the good of people all over the world or alternatively, abrogate your responsibilities and we all suffer the consequences. The choice is yours.”

Questions from the audience included ones seeking more information on Bishop George’s views on capitalism and the assumption of continuous growth, and on the recent tendency to government by decree. Questioners also asked about the role of the established churches and what we as individuals should do. The key message in response was that we as Christians should inform ourselves, engage in the debates in the public sphere, and choose to be true to the message of Jesus – to stand with the poor, the needy and

downtrodden, and be on the side of the environment. The audience was urged to speak up, everywhere, in all circumstances, in issues that are contrary to God’s love.

The next Christians for an Ethical Society forum will be the annual dinner, deferred from August due to the Canberra lockdown. All are welcome. The presentation by Genevieve Jacobs will be on the role of the media in Australia today. Further information and registration details can be found at [ces.org.au](http://ces.org.au)

## Theology and Advocacy, by Len Baglow

Advocacy, Evangelism and Service to the Community are related concepts in theology. All are about announcing and making present the Kingdom of God. Advocacy is about the prophetic role of proclaiming that even though the Kingdom of God has been announced in Christ, the poor, the exploited and even the earth itself still cry out for the fulfilment of that promise and reality. In Evangelism we put in words our experience of the Kingdom so that others might understand and join in the liberating work of the gospel. In Service we act as exemplars of what is happening as the Kingdom of God becomes real.

The theology of advocacy cannot be understood in isolation from Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. However, the theology of the Kingdom of God is itself no simple matter. In the synoptic gospels the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven is mentioned in over 120 verses. The references are wide ranging, often challenging or perplexing and yet central to Jesus' message. It is not coincidental that Jesus' prayer to the Father begins,

*Father, May your name be held holy, Your Kingdom come (Luke 11:2).*

The word "Kingdom" sounds strange to modern ears. Scholars at times use other words to translate the Greek. These include Reign,<sup>1</sup> Estate,<sup>2</sup> and in the case of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, "Empire".<sup>3</sup> Each of these alternate translations alerts us to the depth and breadth of the reality that Jesus is proclaiming. It is clear that for Jesus the Kingdom of God is not just an idea but a happening, an event:

*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15).*

Central to this event is a change that is occurring simultaneously at several levels; the individual, the relational, the societal, the cultural and even at the Kingdom or Empire level, which includes all the others. This is perhaps clearest in the first Beatitude which reads,

*Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:21).*

To the ancient ears this is both a scandalous upturning of political and cultural reality, and also a liberating word for those who are poor who suddenly find themselves first in this announced Kingdom.

And yet of course the Kingdom announced is not yet fully formed. Its existence in space and time depends on those who respond to Christ's call. For the initial small gathering of Jews and associated gentiles this took incredible faith, especially when faced with the massive power and then hostility of the Roman Empire. They responded by building small communities in which they tried to enact the reality of this new Kingdom, and they spread the good news of this new way of living and responding to God.

Today our era is both different from and similar to biblical times. The differences include increases in technology that have led to our computer or information age, significant advances in health care and medicine, and a standard of living for many that is far more luxurious than any Roman emperor could imagine. Yet many

*"The more one is caught up in the empire framework, the harder it is to hear the liberating call of the Kingdom of God."*

<sup>1</sup> Glen Stassen & David Gushee, 2003. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*.

<sup>2</sup> John Cobb, 2015. *Jesus' Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed*.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Funk, Arthur Dewey & the Jesus Seminar, 2015. *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

people still live in poverty while others profit from their labour and live in extraordinary luxury; there are wars and rumours of wars, corruption and exploitation.

Empires have come and gone, but empires remain. In ancient times there were the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Roman empires all juggling at some time for power. Until recently we had the British Empire, and now today we have the American, Chinese and perhaps re-emerging Russian empires. Such human empires have not stopped being exploitative.

Australia as a nation-state (a small kingdom if you will) has had a history of identifying first with the British Empire and more lately with the American. The most obvious example of this is our participation in wars over the last 130 years. However, it is not just wars but a way of thinking about power, race, and exploitation that we have taken for granted, that is at odds with the Kingdom of God proclaimed in Christ.

This has led to a cultural framework in which people aspire to a material security and comfort for themselves and those like them at the expense of the other. This results in a fear of the other. Our current treatment of refugees and the previous white Australia policy are examples of this framework in practice. The more one is caught up in the empire framework, the harder it is to hear the liberating call of the Kingdom of God. Churches which accept these human empire values uncritically (often unconsciously) lose their ability to identify with or announce God's Kingdom.

Paradoxically, the modern democratic movement has grown out of human empires. Democracy provides churches and church members new opportunities for working with others to create a better and fairer society and hence herald the Kingdom. The churches and church members in Canberra are uniquely positioned to play an advocacy role in the unfolding of the Kingdom of God. This is not only because of proximity to the Parliament, but because so many church members have experience either working in the public service or as members of political parties or national organizations such as The Australia Institute or Australia 21.

The challenge for the Uniting Church in the Canberra region is to seize this opportunity. As inequalities grow in Australia and meanness of spirit stalks our political culture, it is certain that God continues to hear the cry of the poor and witnesses their oppression (Exodus 2: 9). Even though we feel inadequate and ill prepared, we have the ability to advocate on a wide range of issues. Will we respond to the call to advocacy? "So come, I send you to Pharaoh ... to bring my people out of Egypt. ... I shall be with you." (Exodus 2: 10-12)

**Len Baglow**

Len is a member of the Presbytery Social Justice Group and of Woden Valley Uniting Church

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## A LIGHTHOUSE CHURCH, by Jenny Rowland, Canberra City Congregation

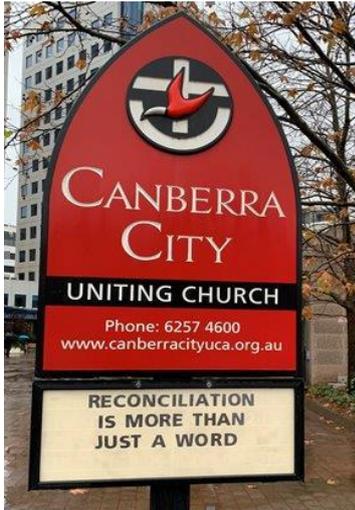


Photo 1: Canberra City Uniting Church's notice board facing Northbourne Avenue in May 2021. Photo by Subramaniam Sukumar.

The Canberra City Congregation aims to be a lighthouse church, showing the way for others. This is part of our calling as followers of Christ.

The congregation had its roots in the only Congregational Church in Canberra, dating from 1929. Current members have therefore inherited a rich tradition of social justice and overseas missionary efforts. It was a natural step for us to welcome our Tongan friends as a formal Uniting Church congregation in 1984, the first ethnic congregation in the then Canberra Presbytery. They are now known as the To e Talatalanoa Congregation. Some of us have visited Tonga, as an important way of getting to know our neighbours better.

For the seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991 we provided office space and much involvement. A later scoping study found an urgent need in Canberra was assistance to people who are experiencing homelessness. We are proud that our Early Morning Centre opened in 2005, with ACT

Government and donor support. The EMC continues to go from strength to strength. Volunteers work with paid staff to provide breakfast, services and facilities now available well beyond early hours on weekdays. Most importantly, the EMC is a place of welcome.

The congregation works in part through action groups. For environment and climate change, we organise or attend forums. These have included running three workshops about caring for the earth in 2018 and 2019 and joining School Strike for Climate protests. We greet Easter Day with a dawn service at Lake Burley Griffin. The congregation participates in earth pilgrimages and in "forest church", worshipping in natural areas such as bushland. We display posters about environmental concerns and have installed solar panels on our building. We are developing an online map of recycling sites in Canberra and collect items for 10c refunds, with funds going to the EMC and [UnitingWorld](#), for both of which we have provided Board members.



Photo 2: The Early Morning Centre ready for guests. Photo provided by the EMC.

Among our reconciliation and multicultural interests we have ministers who play major roles in acknowledging massacres of Aboriginal people. The [Myall Creek Memorial](#) in northern NSW is a particular focus. The congregation sponsored a visit to Canberra in 2017 by Aboriginal artists and dancers from Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. We are glad Frontier Services takes a particular interest in ministry to Aboriginal people. Individual members of the congregation support [Common Grace](#) (a movement pursuing Jesus and justice), worship with the Canberra Aboriginal Church, or study Aboriginal biographies. Being better informed is an important part of our advocacy.

The congregation has been exploring ways in which the cultural and linguistic diversity of our members can be reflected in our worship. We join our Tongan friends in their own activities or ones

they support with other Pacific Islanders in Canberra or their home countries. We are pleased that care for our Pacific neighbours can very often be channelled through UnitingWorld. In our own congregation we stand with our West Papuan members, as they support struggles for independence for their homeland. With our Tamil members we recognise that all is still not well for their ethnic compatriots in Sri Lanka. We provided our old pews to the home church of some of our Fijian members, so allowing them to worship and support their own community better. We are also glad to pray for the [countries listed each week in the World Council of Churches' prayer cycle](#). Some of us attend [annual World Day of Prayer](#) services, which highlight the needs of a different country each year. What a delight it was to hear our To e Talatalanoa women greeting each other with “Bonjour”, the year that France provided the liturgy!

To advocate for refugees and asylum-seekers we attend such events as Palm Sunday refugee rallies, as well as commemorations for the 2001 SIEV X (sinking refugee boat) victims. We have a SIEV X pole at our church and several of our members decorated one at the memorial in Weston Park. Another has been restoring them as the twentieth anniversary of this disaster approaches in October this year. We have links with Companion House, which works with survivors of torture and trauma.

Our Student Action Ministry supports [Christian Students Uniting \(CSU\)](#), a club affiliated with the ANU Students' Association (ANUSA). In seeking to develop the faith of Christian students, we can be a home base for them in Canberra, especially for those from overseas, and provide opportunities for them to use their youthful energy in worship and outreach.

As well as our action groups, one of us is strongly engaged in prison ministry, including to Aboriginal and Pacific Islander inmates. Some members value participating in ecumenical or interfaith activities. Others regularly lead worship in aged care settings, serve as a 'mate' to older people, provide musical entertainment for hospital patients or knit such items as trauma teddies. New ventures arise all the time. In June 2021 the congregation provided the platform for UnitingCare Australia to launch [Uniting Friends of Ageing](#).

What is encouraging is that members of the Canberra City Congregation often meet the same people at events we support or organise. They may come from other Uniting Church congregations, other



Photo 3: Picnic in the Plaza, Easter Day, 4 April 2021. Photo by Richard Scott.

denominations or faiths. It is good to know that we are co-operating to bring justice to disadvantaged people. Sometimes just walking with others is all that is required. It is also necessary to care for ourselves and to acclaim our achievements. Tangible ways of doing this have included celebrating our 90th anniversary in 2019 and inviting Inner North Canberra Uniting Churches and other neighbours to picnics in our plaza in 2020 and 2021. Our members also use their talents and skills in such ways as providing pastoral care, designing and sewing liturgical banners, composing or performing music, administration, writing, catering and organising events.

Worship is the major reason we gather as the Canberra City Congregation. However, we thrive on the challenges of participating in God's community and living our faith. All are welcome to join us in worship and advocacy.

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### Four Poems by Rev Dr Ross Kingham

#### WAIT THE SEASON

The spell was cast,  
all colour drained,  
the dream gone.

Shadow world of nightmare shapes,  
slow-moving, menacing,  
inexorable,  
threatening enfleshment  
(fearful thought).

Touch,  
born of love,  
and words intended  
could never penetrate  
this gloom.

Some things are too deep,  
too hard,  
to speak or to be coaxed to light  
by acts of mercy,  
and friends turn aside,  
dismayed.

But wait the season.

Will come the blaze  
enlightening,  
brilliant in beauty,  
season of warming love.

#### HUNGER

Better, perhaps, to be hungry  
than not.  
To grapple and be stretched  
than to strut,  
nourishing others,  
always  
others  
in their hunger.

Better to fast than to be filled.  
Oh! For the tough grace of desolation.

I don't want it,  
or wilderness,  
or devil, or wild beasts.  
None of them.

Consoling friendship, music and beauty  
for me.

But that which would devour  
and destroy my soul  
may be the strangely precious gift  
for which I would crawl  
the merciless expanse of broken glass  
Spirit-led,  
helped by desert angels.

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Matthew 4:1-11 .and afterward, He was  
hungry'



## SILENCE

All lovers know it –  
that language of love beyond speech,  
unlimited by senses,  
and reason  
and thought,  
beyond explanation  
and definition.

Pathway to a presence  
of the strongest, the sweetest, the most sure  
Love.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence  
And with fear and trembling stand  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
Our full homage to demand.  
At his feet the six-winged seraph,  
Cherubim with sleepless eye  
Veil their faces to the presence  
As with ceaseless voice they cry  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia Lord most high. <sup>[1]</sup>

Rev Dr Ross Kingham is Co-Chair of Canberra Region Presbytery

## AVE MARIA

For every mother  
who weeps  
for daughter,  
for son,  
in the debris and tears  
of grief,  
through long days  
and long, long years.

Source of strength  
ennobling, caressing,  
the crushed spirit.

We hail such deep, deep, beauty.  
Such courage,  
embracing, holding,  
this child,  
this world's  
sorrow



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## Voices for Welcome, by Robert James

As we welcomed new members to Wesley on our UCA Anniversary Sunday recently, we remembered one family among so many yearning for welcome, for home.

For four years, the Murugappan family have lived quiet lives in Biloela, a Queensland town that needs new families to keep local services running. Nades was a valued employee at the local meatworks, working hard to provide for his young family. Priya joined church groups and took her curries to doctors at the local hospital. The day after Priya's visa expired in March 2018, Border Force took this beautiful family away and detained them in Melbourne, Christmas Island, and now in Perth.

We have watched in horror and dismay as the family have been exiled to Christmas Island, exiled from the new home into which they found welcome, exiled from our country's compassion and help. And we watch with concern for where they will be allowed to go from here.

Refugees. Asylum seekers. Reduce people to a collective noun and we strip them of their personhood, capacity, experience, worth. Put these families in boats approaching our shores, boats we have to Stop!! and we fail to show our own humanity as we remove theirs altogether. Priya. Nades. Tharnicaa. Kopika. These humans found home in Biloela. And we rejected them.

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<sup>[1]</sup> From a liturgy of the C4th, 'Liturgy of St James'

Our leaders. The people this country elected to govern. Sent them to prison, effectively. Traumatized children who were born in Australia. Any other child born in Australia would not be so rejected, treated as not, actually, one of us.

Do we trust each other, and ourselves, and the experience we bring to the boat, the storm, the chaos? Like the disciples in the story at Mark 4:35, will we wake Jesus up, not simply to help steady our rudder, but trusting he can, and will, calm the entire storm, bring peace to the lake that does not care?

Do we have enough faith to pray for release of the refugees and asylum seekers from makeshift homes and prison – detention centres, and believe God can bring peace to our world?

Not only in sermons, from which some of these words come, but also as a poet, our Rev. Sarah Agnew has spoken to such situations, within and beyond the church. Sarah offers this poem, 'Children Cry for Freedom' (*In Prayer and protest*, Ginninderra Press, 2014).

Robert James is a member at Wesley Uniting Church and of Presbytery Social Justice Group

**Children Cry for Freedom, by Rev Dr  
Sarah Agnew**

*And well may the children weep before you!  
They are weary ere they run;  
They have never seen the sunshine,  
nor the glory much brighter than the sun.  
Elizabeth Barrett Browning,  
'The Cry of the Children'*

Do you hear the children weeping?  
On islands far off shore we cannot see them,  
lest we see them for who they truly are –  
mirrors of humanity shared with all of us,  
creatures as much deserving dignity  
we demand, the care and kindness shown  
in ready giving to our own kin and kind.

Do you feel the children reaching heavenward  
for God? Though the evidence for God is  
fading under concrete, wire, and bars.

They cling to stories almost forgotten,  
songs they know not how to sing  
in this strange land of mere existence,  
death a hope more promising than life.

Do you know the children, crying,  
as you yourself have done?  
Long forgotten tears of separation from your  
mother, father, home?

Though you yourself have never thrown your  
lot into a boat of 'illegality', braved the

ocean's roar and fight in flight toward the  
freedom of streets that will not explode  
beneath your feet.

Do you fear the children, calling for your  
attention, welcome, love?  
Will it challenge your assumptions, or your  
comfort far too much?

Can you imagine another running,  
from a new home you thought was safe:  
running, hiding, for your mates were stolen  
in the brightness of the day?

This did not happen far away,  
but here, among us, and in our name:  
we are frightening children and each other,  
causing God to weep in shame.

Do you hear the children crying?  
Listen. Let them weep.  
Join your tears beside them, for they cry  
for you, for your humanity,  
fallen into the deep.

Can we retrieve it?  
Will we heal the broken bonds between us,  
the soul of all of us?  
Will we heed the children,  
crying for their freedom,  
and the freedom of us all?

**Sarah Agnew**  
[sarah.agnew@wesleycanberra.org.au](mailto:sarah.agnew@wesleycanberra.org.au)

## **ACT Council of Churches Advocacy Discussion, by Robbie Tulip & John Goss**

As Uniting Church representatives to the ACT Council of Churches, we have opened a conversation calling for the Council to advocate policy reforms to the ACT government. The Council has agreed to continue this discussion.

Commitment to advocacy reflects the tenet of Christian faith that the gospel compels us to speak out against evil in the world. In this context of an active faith, the combined voice of Christian churches can advocate to government and the public through the ecumenical council in ways that add to the voices of heads of churches. Where churches have consensus on questions of social policy, joining together can have greater authority and influence than when speaking separately.

Ecumenical cooperation between churches seeks to support the [Lund Principle](#), affirming that churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately. Ecumenical social advocacy to government calls us to identify areas where churches can agree, and where our combined voice might influence legislative, policy and budgetary positions most effectively.

We suggested gambling reform and social housing as advocacy topics that the ACT Churches Council could initially consider. We would also like to open discussion on climate change, more to raise awareness within Churches than to advocate to government. At the council meeting, the topics of indigenous policy and Voluntary Assisted Dying were also raised, although members suggested these would be more challenging to find consensus on.

The Churches Council agreed to discuss next steps in the process to being a body that can advocate. To take this forward, we are preparing a paper on gambling reform intended for endorsement by all member churches, aiming for submission to the ACT government in 2022. Material from the [Canberra Gambling Reform Alliance](#), where John Goss is Uniting Church representative, will provide the basis for a proposal to share with constituent churches for discussion and approval. The Council will invite discussion with experts to identify priority concerns.

On social housing, Government has made some progress, but there is a huge gap in the number of public housing units built. Waiting lists are far too long for low-cost permanent accommodation. Our Presbytery prepared a paper on affordable housing that could be a basis for Churches Council discussion. Resources include a [2018 paper from St Ninian's Uniting Church](#) and [information on homelessness from the ACT Council of Social Services](#).

Many local churches are involved in climate change advocacy. A possible role for the Churches Council might be to help convene policy discussion, to help raise broader awareness and educate member churches about the relationship between Christian faith and climate change. Possible contacts include the [Uniting Climate Action Network](#) and the [Australian Religious Response to Climate Change](#).

The Churches Council will discuss how we should get member church approval to take positions as a council. Processes must ensure statements reflect genuine consensus. Discussions on advocacy priorities will help us work together to present views to the ACT Government and public. Please contact us if you would like to discuss this work.

**Poem - 1788**

The year was 1788,  
Big white clouds on the horizon  
The koori watched in disbelief  
as Australia was stolen away.

So look out Sydney Harbour,  
there's nothing you can do.  
Here comes an English man  
with a brand-new law for you.  
If it moves, shoot it dead,  
if not just chop it down.

The gun and the axe, the grog and the  
pox, were bound for Botany Bay.  
An older land, a wiser hand,  
almost swept away,  
how could you celebrate that day?

Land rights now for Aborigines.  
Makaratta Treaty is what we need.  
The bloodshed of colonial times  
will haunt us night and day

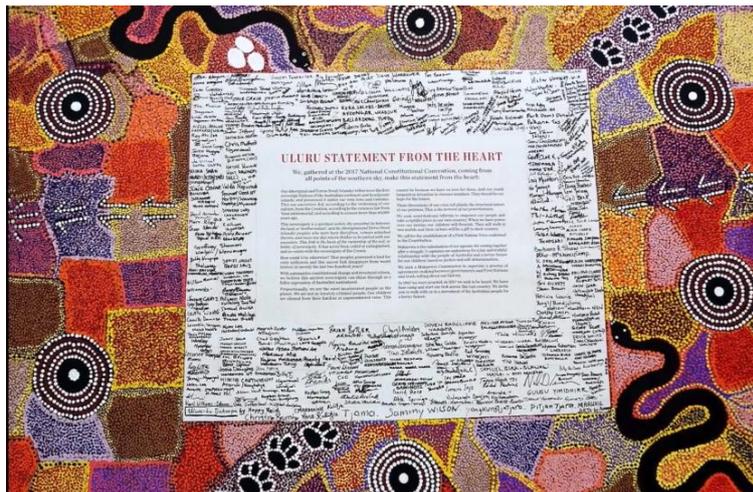
until we reconcile the people of  
Australia.

Look to the south on a crystal winter  
night,  
you'll see two stars pointing the way  
to the Southern Cross.  
And what's that supposed to mean?  
It's Australia for you.

The pointers are a pair of white  
cockatoos,  
the Cross is an old gum tree.  
They're put there to show  
what we all know  
Humanity must live within the land.

Children of the southern land,  
Awaken and arise.  
Cast off those worn-out colonial lies.  
There's an ancient land for you  
if you'll only accept it  
Sing to your country Australia.

Robbie Tulip



# VIEWPOINT

Volume 4, Issue 1, Spring 2021