

Studies in Religion

Christian ethics – a Uniting Church viewpoint

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She was also a member of the Uniting Church Assembly task group who drafted the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice for Ministers adopted by the 2000 Assembly.

She is a member of the Uniting Church's National Social Responsibility and Justice Committee.

She is responsible for course Christian Perspectives on Public Policy at United Theological College, North Parramata.

She is co-chair of the Social Justice Network of the National Council of Churches (which includes Orthodox, Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting churches, Salvation Army, Religious Society of Friends and Churches of Christ). Her PhD thesis was *Speaking together: a methodology for the National Council of Churches contribution to public policy debate in Australia*.

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Note:

Uniting Church in Australia

Extracts from Ann Wansbrough *Speaking Together: a methodology for the National Council of Churches contribution to public policy debate in Australia* PhD thesis Sydney University 2000

Part A theology

The *Basis of Union*¹ (BU) is the basic document that guides the theological understanding of the church.² The UCA uses other historical documents³ to inform, not control, its faith, especially regarding matters that change over time, such as the understanding of the role of civil government with regard to the Christian faith.⁴ The *BU* gives the Biblical witness the primary place, although not an exclusive one, in understanding the Christian Tradition and its implications for life.⁵ Adherence to the BU is understood in ecumenical terms.⁶ The BU has been summarised in the following statement used at the Inaugural Assembly in 1977:⁷

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
We proclaim Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen
One,
confessing him as Lord
to the glory of God the Father.
In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
we acclaim Jesus as the Lord of the church,
the Head over all things,
the beginning of a new creation.
We acknowledge that we live and work
between the time of Christ's death and
resurrection
and the final consummation of all things
which he will bring.
We are a pilgrim people,
always on the way towards a promised goal;
on the way Christ feeds us with word and
sacraments,
and we have the gift of the Spirit

in order that we may not lose the way.

We will live and work within the faith and unity
of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church,
bearing witness to that unity

which is both Christ's gift and his will.

We affirm that every member of the church
is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

Together with all the people of God,

we will serve the world for which Christ died.

And we await with hope the day of the Lord
Jesus.⁸

The UCA "lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church".⁹ It has a Trinitarian faith, based on the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.¹⁰ Its roots in the Reformed, Wesleyan¹¹ and Evangelical traditions give it a strong emphasis on salvation through the Christ, the grace of God, and Scripture as the source of knowledge of salvation. The person and work of Christ is seen as central to the faith. Christ is the means of forgiveness of sin, revealer of God, and the Head of all creation. He "brings into being what could not otherwise exist".¹²

Theological understanding of social justice work

The Uniting Church understands *the work of Christ* as being about not only justification by faith of individuals, but about *the renewal of the whole of humankind and creation*.

Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, a new humanity. 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 of creation.¹³

The UCA thus understands its life and mission as being a community of reconciliation both internally and in society.¹⁴ The Christian life of the baptised believer and of the community of the baptised, the Church, involves expressing

that sense of renewal.¹⁵ The UCA agrees with the view of struggle for justice that came out of the World Council of Churches conference "Your Kingdom Come", in 1980. This recognised a relationship between the Kingdom of God and the struggles of history. It sees the Kingdom as the gift of God that inspires "our penultimate struggles" and as involving identification, or solidarity, with the poor and the marginalised.¹⁶ The UCA agrees with the links between baptism and the Kingdom in BEM.¹⁷ The UCA shares with the Orthodox an understanding of the Eucharist that acknowledges

...the real mystery of Christ present to his people in the sacrament constituting them as his people who participate in his kingdom, and in the renewal of creation, and impelling them to mission.¹⁸

As BEM states,

The Eucharist embraces all aspects of life. It is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world...All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ. Through the Eucharist the all-renewing grace of God penetrates and restores human personality and dignity.¹⁹

The UCA's response to BEM suggests that BEM lacks adequate acknowledgment that the life of the Christian and the church are marked not only by joyful anticipation but also by

...hoping, longing, yearning, even groaning; and that we live in Christ away from Christ, constrained to cry, in the very celebration of his presence in the Eucharist, "O Lord come".²⁰

*The Uniting Church understands God's mission as involving the whole of life*²¹. This emerges in the first three paragraphs of the BU, which talk about the Church being called to serve the world for which Christ died, unity of faith and life in

Christ, and God's claim over the whole of creation. The hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God is the hope of a kingdom of justice, peace and wholeness, which "transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries".²² In Christ, history has been radically renewed, as is signified in the sacrament of baptism.²³ The UCA's social justice action is an expression of eschatological hope. No human political activity can be confused with the Kingdom of God, but hope of the Kingdom requires that the church be actively engaged in the world. Witnessing to faith requires actions as well as words.²⁴

The UCA sees itself as *a pilgrim people*. In 1991, the Assembly committed itself to reflect and act in mission under the theme of "Forward together: risking the way of Jesus". This theme has been taken up in many ways in the life of the UCA. The theme has been explained as follows.

A Uniting Church in Australia which risks living the way of Jesus,
participates in God's action in the world,
enables people
to discover new life through the Spirit
and to live by that discovery.²⁵

The UCA is committed to inclusiveness and consensus in church government. Some aspects of this have already been described. Since 1994, the church has used a consensus model of decision-making in its councils,²⁶ as a means of encouraging participation.

Together, these aspects of the *Basis of Union* lay the foundations for a contextual approach to theology, in which dialogue between theology and reality is possible.

The commitment of the UCA to social justice as an essential dimension of mission and ministry is evident in the additional ordination vow added in 1991:

Will you, by word and deed,
proclaim the good news of God in Christ
to those outside the community of faith;

and will you work for justice and peace in the world?

With God's help, I will.²⁷

The UCA understands itself as having the right and responsibility to influence parliament with regard to legislation.²⁸ The UCA does not assume that the Bible can be a blueprint for society; the way the tradition informs social comment is more complex than that, as discussion below and the case studies in Appendix 2 show.²⁹

Theologically, the role of the church in the public arena has been described as not merely to deal with particular policy issues, but "to try to understand where God is in our nation bringing wholeness and restoration to people" and to give people a "vision which would restore them as the subjects of history". The issues of the time, such as peace and poverty,

are not simply issues of morality but are moments in the life of the nation which we must deal with in order to open up new possibilities and visions for the people to control their own history free from the control of false gods and misleading visions³⁰

The UCA sees its role in the public arena as a continuation of mainstream understanding of the mission of the Church.³¹ The church is involved in the political arena as a protest against idolatry, as an expression of its eschatological hope, and as co-creators with God.

The Christian community is called to both proclaim the salvation brought by the crucified Christ and to embody in its own life a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. It is called to resist those structures (both inside and outside the church) which oppress and destroy and, with God, to transform human community.

Faithfulness to the God in whom we believe may mean that we will be a community dedicated to resisting some of the things done in our

community. It is to declare that God alone is worthy of our total allegiance, and that governments cannot usurp God in the claims they make upon citizens. To not do so would be to deny our God and to fall into idolatry.³²

The role of the church in politics is also understood as an outcome of incarnational theology.

To suggest that the Church could distance itself from this normal human activity is both to strain credulity and also to promote an image of the Church isolated from normal events. In other words, not only would it be impossible for the Church to eschew politics, but it would be a strange Church which attempted to do so. The heart of the Christian faith is God's gracious action in sharing human life through Jesus Christ. It would seem strange for the Church, the bearer of the tradition of God's work to turn away from the very human events which God Himself embraced.³³

UCA social justice work

Assembly commitments to human rights and social justice

Statement to the Nation 1977 - commentary

The inaugural Assembly in 1977 made a *Statement to the Nation*.³⁴ It notes that the churches coming into union have been involved in the public arena in the past,³⁵ the UCA will continue this involvement.

A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church, our response to the Christian Gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.

The statement notes that the UCA is part of the Christian Church in the Asia Pacific region. It lists a number of Christian values and principles that the church should uphold, mainly related to democracy in civil society, and continues:

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond...

It affirms several ESC human rights, and continues:

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between rich and poor.

It has a paragraph on the human rights of future generations and the need for ecological responsibility. It concludes with a rationale for involvement in the public arena which has set the tone for UCA work ever since:

Finally, we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is to God, under whose judgement the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values that must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere - the family of the One God - the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth, the One who gave His life for others.

The statement makes it clear that the UCA is committed to human rights, economic justice, and ecological responsibility. It makes these commitments part of the self-identity and *raison*

d'etre of the UCA. This statement provides a mandate for the social justice work of the UCA.³⁶ As its methodology has developed, this and the 1988 Statement to the Nation have come to be seen as providing the most general level of middle axioms to guide UCA work.

The statement is written as an expression of the UCA's self-identity, rather than as a statement to guide policy analysis. The UCA's self-identity includes a role in the public arena, in which the UCA will evaluate public policy and national directions on the basis of some very clear criteria, related to human rights, human dignity, the well being of the whole human race rather than the self-interest of Australia, and the wellbeing of the natural order which affects future generations.

Statement to the Nation 1988 - commentary

In its 1988 Statement to the Nation, the Assembly addresses Australian issues during the Bicentennial Celebrations.³⁷ It focuses especially on Aboriginal issues, rectifying the absence of these specific issues from the 1977 statement. While work on Aboriginal issues is certainly consistent with the 1977 statement, the 1988 Assembly builds on a growing awareness that some dimensions of Aboriginal issues are unique. Invasion and dispossession do not apply to other justice issues in Australia. Aboriginal people continue to be the First Peoples of Australia, not migrants whose choice to come to Australia implies a commitment to adapt, to some extent, to Australian culture.

The 1988 Assembly thus begins its statement with a recognition that Aboriginal people have inhabited Australia for at least 40,000 years, whereas Australia is celebrating two centuries of history. It acknowledges that there are many good things in Australian society, but this is not an acquiescence in modern history. The foundations of Australian society are "justice, equality and mutual respect", "placing care for the people who have least above sectional interests", the welcoming of migrants and refugees, "solidarity and friendship" among

Australians in times of crisis, and a role as peacemaker in Asia and the Pacific. The Assembly then uses these values to expose the injustice done to Aboriginal people, who have not experienced the Australia which holds these values, but an invasive, colonising, discriminatory, dispossessing Australian nation. That is, the Assembly uses those matters that led to Australian national pride as the basis for recognising that citizens "are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who are Aboriginal people".

The fifth and sixth paragraphs set out the criteria that Australia must meet if it is to have "integrity" as a nation: truthful history, publicly acknowledged, and action, both legislative and popular, to rectify the injustices Australians have done to Aboriginal people.

The Assembly then commits the UCA, whatever choice Australia might make, to stand with Aboriginal Australians, as both a Christian and a patriotic duty:

As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in co-operation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together.

The second half of the statement moves into more general issues, which encompass, but are not unique to, Aboriginal issues. The Assembly continues the commitment of the 1977 statement to work for positive values such as justice, peace, honesty, integrity, tolerance, compassion and a loving, caring community, and against acquisitiveness, greed, discrimination, prejudice, violence, and oppression. It commits the UCA to struggle against the attitudes and ideologies that underlie injustice, and "all systems and attitudes which set person against person, group against group, or nation against nation". Examples of structural injustices are division and injustices based on racial, cultural, political, economic, sexual and religious lines; the widening gap between rich and poor.

In this statement the UCA recognises that injustice is a matter of systemic evil, as well as personal attitude. It is systems - "social and political structures" - as well as individuals, who must be confronted and changed. This view undergirds UCA involvement in the policy process, as the case studies illustrate, and its understanding of mission³⁸. The final form of injustice that is recognised is against God's creation, the natural world. Again, the problem is structures, not merely individual attitudes. Life is vulnerable because of the way societies relate to the natural world. This needs to change; destruction needs to be opposed, and "responsible management, use and occupation of the earth" promoted.

The Assembly ends this statement with a reminder that the UCA makes these commitments because of its obedience to God, and hope in Jesus Christ. The commitment includes, however, a recognition of diversity of faith and culture in Australia, which requires a sense of community based on "justice, peace and mutual respect". It ends with a brief but significant prayer: "May the peace of God be with us all".

Underlying the statement is a sense of choosing to identify with and learn from those who experience injustice; ideological suspicion; awareness of competing ideologies (including histories and national myths) that need to be criticised, challenged and confronted; and a sense that Christian faith and values have something to contribute to national health, but require action, not only words, on the part of the church. The statement flows out of the UCA's faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and the hope that Christians have through Christ. The Assembly understands the social implication of that faith in an inclusive way, seeking to build bridges with "people of goodwill", whatever their faith. The goal is not some abstract stance on the part of the church, but a commitment to change, to make society and its structures and institutions more just. It includes a number of criteria by which to evaluate public policy, albeit at a fairly general level.

¹ *Basis of Union* (1971 and 1992 editions) in *Constitution and Regulations 1996 Edition* Melbourne: Uniting Church Press various editions, most recent 1996. The question of the authority and status of the BU was discussed widely in the church 1994-1997 and was strongly affirmed. Advisory Group on Church Polity: Report on Responses to the Discussion Paper *The status role and authority of the Basis of Union within the Uniting Church in Australia* in *Eighth Assembly 1997 Reports and Working Papers*.

² *The status, authority and role of the Basis of Union within the Uniting Church in Australia* Sydney: UCA Assembly 1995 examines the place of the BU. See also Resolution 97.37 *Minutes of the Eighth Assembly*.

³ BU #9 and 10. See OWEN Michael (ed.) *Witness of faith: historic documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press 1984

⁴ #3, page 175 in Appendix B, Uniting Church in Australia/Lutheran Church in Australia, *Minutes of the Sixth Assembly*.

⁵ BU # 4,5,11. INCE Gwen *The Bible and the Uniting Church in Australia Occasional Paper No 8* Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Sexuality Task Group 1995, while the work of an individual scholar, is probably the best description of how the implications of the Basis of Union for using the Bible. See also SQUIRES John *The authority of the Bible in Ethical Decision-making* Sydney: UCA Commission on Doctrine 1994 (prepared in consultation with the commission) An example of how the UCA uses the Bible is the document *Why does the Uniting Church in Australia ordain women to the Ministry of the Word*, Sydney: UCA Assembly 1990, adopted by Standing Committee (Minute 90.32.7).

⁶ The following words are proposed for a revised version of the relevant ordination or commissioning vows for candidates for specified ministries: Will you, being guided by the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia, live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church? Resolution 97.37.03 *Minutes of the Eight Assembly*. A report to this Assembly clarified the meaning of the term, with this proposal, which has not yet been finally determined. (The question would be the same for all specified ministries).

⁷ The statement has been part of the liturgical resources in *Uniting in Worship: People's Book*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press 1988, page 130. See also *The status, authority and role of the Basis of Union within the Uniting Church in Australia* Sydney: UCA Assembly 1995 page 11. Resolution 97.37.04 (c) *Minutes of the Eighth Assembly '97* as

part of action to increase awareness and understanding of the Basis of Union, urges its liturgical use as one way of increasing members awareness of the content of the Basis of Union.

⁸ Copyright Uniting Church in Australia

⁹ BU #2

¹⁰ BU # 9

¹¹ Wesley was Anglican, but was strongly influenced by the Eastern Fathers. RUNYON Theodore *The new creation: John Wesley's theology today* Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998

¹² BU #3 and 4

¹³ BU # 3

¹⁴ *A pilgrim people: review of the distribution of resources in the Uniting Church in Australia in the seventh Assembly 9-16 July 1994 Minutes and Reports*, page 54 section 4.3 (a) (iii).

¹⁵ See Appendix vi #6-14 on baptism in *Minutes of the third assembly 1982* (Resolution 82.53 (2))

¹⁶ Report of Commission on Ecumenical Affairs to the UCA Assembly, in *Third Assembly Agenda and Working Papers*, page 122-3, summarising the report of the WCC's Commission for World Mission and Evangelism to the Central Committee of the WCC.

¹⁷ Report of the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs, Appendix 1: Proposed response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document, *Minutes of the fourth Assembly 1985* page 102, referring to BEM on Baptism, # E7 page 3.

¹⁸ Summary of agreements reached in dialogue with the Greek Orthodox, # 4.1.3 of Report of the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs, *Minutes of the fourth Assembly 1985*.

¹⁹ "Eucharist" # 20 in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111* Geneva: World Council of Churches 1982, quoted in Report of the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs, *Minutes of the fourth Assembly 1985* page 97

²⁰ Appendix 1: Proposed response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document in Report of the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs, *Minutes of the fourth Assembly 1985*, page 105

²¹ BU ##1,2 and 3

²² BU #2

²³ "Appendix B Baptism" in *Minutes and proceedings of the Second Assembly 1979*

²⁴ BU # 4

²⁵ Gregor Henderson, Assembly General Secretary, November 1994 quoted as a breakout in *the Seventh Assembly 9-16 July 1994: minutes and reports*.

²⁶ The consensus model is set out in *A manual for meetings in the Uniting Church*, which is published with the *Constitution and Regulations 1996 edition* Melbourne: Uniting Church Press 1996.

²⁷ Resolution 91.24.2 *Minutes of the Sixth Assembly 1991*

²⁸ Appendix B, Uniting Church in Australia/Lutheran Church in Australia, *Minutes of the Sixth Assembly* # 3.

²⁹ The view that the Gospel can be the straightforward source of laws is held by some within the UCA, such as Rev Fred Nile MLC, but such a view is at odds with the approach taken in social justice work which is accountable to Assembly or the synods.

³⁰ Report of ACSR, in *Minutes of the Fourth Assembly 1985* #2 page 145. This understanding is further explored by the ACSR Chairperson in SPYKERBOER Han *The prophetic role of the church* Sydney: ASCR 1983.

³¹ "Statement to the Nation" Inaugural Assembly 1977.

³² Report of the SRJC, *Minutes of the Fifth Assembly 1988*, # 4.1 page 118.

³³ (HERBERT Harry) BOARD FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY *The church and politics* Sydney: UCA Board for Social Responsibility 1994. While other councils are not bound by the views expressed in this document, it reflects generally accepted understandings in the UCA and has been used by SRJC in its kit of UCA materials on social justice issues.

³⁴ "Assembly Statements" in *Minutes of the First (Inaugural) Assembly 1977* pages 27-8 Also in WANSBROUGH Ann *Give us this day our daily bread: Economic justice: Resolutions and statements of the May 1985 Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia* Sydney: UCA Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, 1986 Appendix 1.

³⁵ Recent research has confirmed and strengthened this view. For example, Wesley's work and writings paid considerable attention to social issues, including the environment and economics. See, for example JENNINGS Theodore *Good news to the poor: John Wesley's evangelical economics* Nashville: Abingdon Press 1990; RUNYON Theodore *The new creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998; WANSBROUGH Ann *Response to Runyon's "Economics and the moral image of God"* paper presented at conference *Wesley and Contemporary Issues*, Wesley College, University of Sydney, September 29 to October 2, 1998.

(<http://nsw.uca.org.au/bsr>).

³⁶ See for example report of ACSR in *Third Assembly: Agenda and Working Papers 1982*, Report of ACSR in *Minutes of the Fourth Assembly 1985* #1, Report of Social Responsibility and Justice in *Minutes of the Seventh Assembly 1994* # 31.4-8.

³⁷ Appendix viii - Proposed Statement to the Nation, *Minutes of the Fifth Assembly 1988* page 85 and Resolution 88.18.1

³⁸ See #7.7 of the Report of the Commission for Mission *Eighth Assembly: reports and working papers*, which names "systemic economic and social injustice" as one of the aspects of Australian society to which the UCA needs to respond in mission.

Uniting Church in Australia

Part B Ethics

- We use **scripture, tradition and reason – and experience**. The question is: how does one relate these things to each other – different methods lead to different ethical systems.
- While these are the sources that are usually named, in practice **the list of sources is wider**: Scripture, the Christian tradition (that is, doctrine and theology), the Christian moral tradition, interdisciplinary study of current issues, the Christian community, informed conscience, social norms, deductive reasoning, compassion and “a real sense of our own fallibility”.
- Some Christians take a **commandment based or rules based approach**. The Uniting Church tends to take a **principles based approach**, based on our understanding of the nature of God, not blind obedience. We take a different view on some matters from some other churches because of this eg because we believe in a God of grace, we accept people divorcing and remarrying. But we are stronger on social policy advocacy than some churches, because we believe that the God of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures is a God of social justice, a God of liberation, a God who holds people with power accountable.
- This means that some Christians quote bible verses as the basis for ethics, but we tend not to do this. We tend to **start from our basic beliefs about God**, as a God who forgives, a God of grace and mercy, the Creator God who loves all people etc. We are interested in **theological ethics** eg the national Assembly discussion paper on sexual relationships, the statement on the rights of nature and rights of future generations. Official work of the UCA does not usually rely on particular Bible verses – although we may quote the Bible to illustrate a theological point.
- We find out who God is from **sacred stories**, that is from the stories in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.
 - (a) One of the interesting things about these stories is that they do not always reflect the moral values of the commandments. God is very gracious. God makes promises to people who are not paragons of virtue – people like King David, who is an adulterer and a murderer. In the Greek Scriptures of the Christian Church, Jesus is very gracious to people who were looked down on by society. So ethics is not about rules or judging other people, or excluding them; it is not even about judging ourselves – **ethics is about living in response to God’s love, mercy and forgiveness**. It is about **being shaped by God** through ways of holiness such as study, prayer and action.
 - (b) We learn about God holding people accountable for their use of power from the story of the Exodus, and we find it in the Song of Mary (in the Gospel of Luke) and in the description Jesus gives of the day of judgement, when the nations of the world will be judged on the basis of how they treated the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the naked and those in prison.
- We recognize a **distinction between what we may choose as individual moral agents and what we can advocate as public policy** eg regarding abortion, euthanasia. So we encourage church members to act morally, based on scripture, tradition, reason and experience, but we do not punish them when they disagree with the church (except that some UCA churches accept homosexuals as equals, while others forbid them to take an active role in leadership and ministry).
- There are at least **three types of ethical reasoning in Christianity** –
 - **deductive** (from scripture or theology to behaviour),

- **inductive** (from experience to theology to behaviour) and
- **dialogical**: theology and experience being brought into dialogue in a way that influences both.

UnitingCare NSW.ACT tends to use dialogical reasoning. This leads us to different answers from some other churches. Our work is context – sensitive ie it recognizes that sometimes one cannot lay down absolutes of right and wrong, but that ethical understanding needs to take account of context.

- We also take account of **the clash of values**. Often real issues involve more than one value or principle. For example, while we would agree with the Catholic church that there are too many abortions, we would not agree with them that abortion is always wrong – it depends on the circumstances.
- In the area of social ethics and public policy, we see the **international human rights** covenants as important – also other international law such as environmental treaties, refugee convention, International Labour Organisation conventions, international nuclear weapons controls and the UN charter. Human rights are basic criteria for assessing behaviour of government and business. We all have a responsibility, as individuals, to respect the human rights of others.
- **We do not try to bind our church members** – we offer support, wisdom, guidance, and education but do not control our members. Eg family ministry policy rather than family policy, abortion resolution offers guidance, but leaves the final decision to the woman.
- **We take seriously the ethics of public discourse** – the fact that in debate about public policy such as violence, war, peace, bioethics, environment, we have to argue in a way that other people will accept, not just on the basis of church beliefs. But because

many Australians and many MPs claim to be Christian, we also indicate why our beliefs lead us to these conclusions.

Examples

- Bioethics – Genetic Screening seminar
- The environment – rights of nature and rights of future generations
- Family ministry policy – relating scripture, tradition, interdisciplinary study, and experience – drawing on sacred stories.
- Supporting social justice through prayer – ways of holiness.
- Other materials: Uniting faith and sexuality; abortion statements.

In much of our work we combine the following elements:

- What do they **people in the situation** say about it (or what is happening to the earth?) eg what are outworkers telling us about the way they are treated by the people they supply with garments made in their homes?
Eg with regard to genetic screening, what do people with disabilities say?
With regard to the earth, what is the earth telling us through salination, visible air pollution, algal bloom in rivers, changes in climate, and so on?
- What **ideology** supports injustice (eg to workers, or supports war, or supports environmental damage)? What is wrong with this ideology (**ideological critique**)? Human rights analysis, structural or social analysis, policy analysis.
- **Theological critique** – self suspicion.
 - How does ideology misuse theology.
 - How has theology been distorted by ideology.
 - What do we really believe about God and therefore about what is appropriate in this situation?
- **Middle axioms** – general directions, principles to guide action, criteria for evaluating public policy eg on industrial relations, environment, war.

See the rights of nature and the rights of future generations

- **Action.** No point in discussion if it is not translated into advocacy, change, etc.
- **Praxis – theology, thinking and action being integrated so that they each influence the other.**

See diagram of Hermeneutic circle

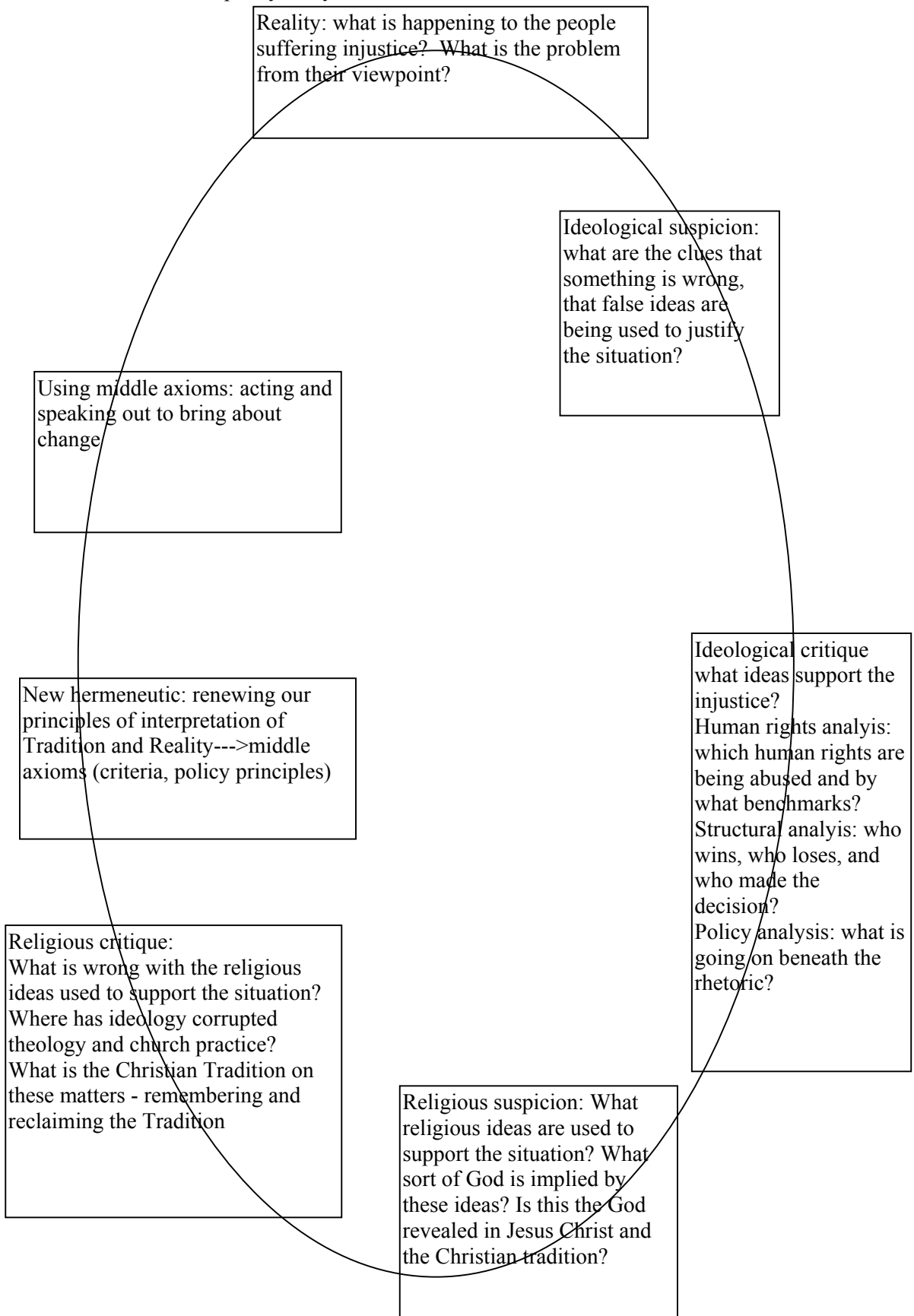
Example.

In March 2001 UnitingCare NSW.ACT held a seminar on genetic screening. Genetic screening can be prenatal, or can be for insurance or employment purposes. In each case, people with genetic disability need to be consulted.

The seminar had as its keynote speaker Dr Tom Shakespeare, who is an academic (sociology) who himself has a genetic disability. We also had segments where other people with genetic disabilities, including one person with an intellectual developmental disability, could express their views. In addition there were speakers on the theological issues and the medical issues.

This is an example of UnitingCare implementing the method I have outlined. People without disabilities often see disabilities as a fate worse than death, and think that genetic disability discovered in prenatal screening should lead to abortion. People with disabilities generally value life, and do not think they would be better off dead. It is one example of where talking with people in a particular situation, rather than talking about them as if they had no opinion, is absolutely essential to understanding the ethical issues.

Figure 11.2 The hermeneutic circle for Australian church policy analysis



Statement to the Nation 1977

Uniting Church in Australia – Assembly

People of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches have united. A new church has been born.

We, who are members of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia address the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long and at times difficult, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race.

We acknowledge with gratitude that the churches from which we have come have contributed in various ways to the life and development of this nation. A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.

We are conscious of our responsibilities within and beyond this country. We particularly acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In these contexts we make certain affirmations at the time of our inauguration.

- We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.
- We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or

dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

- We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.
- We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere - the family of the One God – the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave His life for others.

In the spirit of His self-giving love we seek to go forward.

Statement to the Nation 1988

Uniting Church in Australia - Assembly

In this country which has been inhabited for 40,000 years, the Australian nation is celebrating the Bicentennial of the first European settlement. The Uniting Church, now in its second decade, greets our fellow Australian citizens on this occasion.

We give thanks for those times when the Australian society has established justice, equality, and mutual respect among people; has placed care for the people who have least above sectional interests; has welcomed new migrants and refugees; has exercised solidarity and friendship in times of crisis in Australia across divisions of race and culture; and has engaged constructively with the peoples of Asia, the Pacific and the rest of the world as peacemaker.

In the last two centuries the movements of history have brought together here in one nation, people of diverse cultures. As a church which is itself composed of people of many cultures and races, both Aboriginal and migrant, we rejoice in the vision of a multicultural society where these peoples may live together in unity and diversity, maintaining different cultural traditions, yet forging a common destiny based on commitment to the ideals of equality of opportunity, tolerance, justice and compassion.

At the same time, those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are the descendants of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who were Aboriginal people. In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal experience of violence and injustice.

The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularised in the media, must

cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation.

The integrity of our nation will be measured by action; by legislative action which honours the Aboriginal plea for justice, and by popular action by which the Australian people express their willingness to support Aboriginal Australians in the quest for justice and their struggle to reconstruct their society.

As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in co-operation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together.

In co-operation with all fellow Australians of goodwill, we are committed to work for justice and peace, calling for honesty and integrity, encouraging tolerance and compassion, challenging acquisitiveness and greed, opposing discrimination and prejudice, condemning violence and oppression and creating a loving and caring community.

We are conscious of conflicts and tensions within the nation and the world. We deplore the divisions of humanity along racial, cultural, political, economic, sexual and religious lines. In obedience to God, we struggle against all systems and attitudes which set person against person, group against group, or nation against nation.

We recognise a widening gap between the rich and the poor, not only within Australia, but within the whole human community. We will strive to uphold the rightful claims of the poor on the resources of this nation and the world. We will seek to identify and challenge all social and political structures and all human attitudes which perpetuate and compound poverty.

We affirm our belief that the natural world is God's creation; good in God's eyes, good in itself, and good in sustaining human life. Recognising the vulnerability of the life and

resources of creation, we will work to promote the responsible management, use and occupation of the earth by human societies. We will seek to identify and challenge all structures and attitudes which perpetuate and compound the destruction of creation.

As a Christian church, born out of the struggles of Australian Christians to live in obedience to God in Australia, we find hope in Jesus Christ. We recognise that we Australian people are of diverse faiths and cultures and our desire is that we live together here in one community in justice, peace and mutual respect.

May the peace of God be with us all.

13. A call to justice concerning employment

(This was part of a report of this title to the 1994 Assembly. This section was adopted by the Assembly).

There is no one simple solution to unemployment; there are no magic answers. Economic growth¹, restructuring of industry², increased competitiveness, deregulation of the labour market (with lower wage levels for low skilled workers)³, worksharing⁴ or reduction of the public sector⁵ will not solve the problem, even where they assist the situation. In some cases they will exacerbate the situation. Increased production and consumption of goods is not a satisfactory solution: unrestrained consumerism places the planet at risk and does not deal with questions of global economic justice. However, the economy is not beyond control. Society has a responsibility to ensure that the economy is based on appropriate values and goals, and is directed according to the wishes of society. It is not appropriate that the economy shape and control society. Public policy is a complex matter, because what is done in one area of policy affects what happens to people and society in quite different aspects of life. No one principle can be absolutised.

The role of church councils is to affirm principles consistent with Christian tradition and analysis of the issues, by which to assess current and proposed social and economic policy, as a basis for ongoing research, comment and action by agencies and church members. However, such principles require judgements to be made; the following directions for economic and social policy are implied by the preceding principles, and have been adopted by the Assembly as "A call for justice concerning employment"

13.1 Australia should adopt the goal of full employment at adequate wages in an ecologically sustainable economy, and adopt appropriate measures to ensure that this goal is met, through the cooperation of

government, business and unions.⁶ There should be an active employment policy, with the public sector acting (in addition to its other roles) as employer of last resort, ie providing jobs to the those who have been unemployed for a certain time.⁷ High levels of unemployment should not be accepted as long as there is useful work which goes undone, and there are people who are overworked. There needs to be commitment to job creation in the business, public and community sectors, in a way consistent with concern for human rights of workers. As work is restructured it should take account of the needs of workers and their families.

13.2 Dealing with the problem of unemployment must not be at the expense of Australia's Indigenous people. Legislation which protects Indigenous rights should provide administrative processes which are as efficient as possible without compromising those rights.

13.3 Increasing Australia's competitiveness should not be at the expense of human rights or the rights of Australia's Indigenous people. Australia's response to unemployment should be based on the dignity of the human person and respect for human rights. Many factors contribute to Australia's competitiveness in world markets. As the experience of other OECD countries shows, it is not appropriate or necessary that Australian competitiveness be based on low wages and poor working conditions. Rather Australia's competitiveness should be based on a positive industry policy which encourages high quality products and service and value added products, through an emphasis on good management, quality education and training, high quality scientific research and technological innovation, and creative design.⁸

The corollary of this is that **Australia must not accept totally free trade.** There should be some forms of protection for Australian workers against imports produced in circumstances which contravene international labour standards (ILO conventions) which Australian business is expected to meet.

There should also be effective anti-dumping measures.

13.4 The public sector should be maintained as an effective provider of services and infrastructure. The public sector is an important employer and also funds a large proportion of jobs in the community sector. It supports the business sector through the provision of infrastructure and by buying goods and services from the business sector. Cutbacks to the public sector have a regressive impact, ie reduction in services has more effect on the poor than those on higher incomes. Many so-called productivity cuts do not result in more efficient services, but rather in fewer services or overworked staff.

13.5 Reduction in poverty should remain a priority. One of the causes of cyclical unemployment is increasing inequality and poverty.⁹ When people exist on unemployment benefits or low wages, they cannot afford to purchase goods and services. People are forced to work longer hours, or to have a second worker in the family, simply to make ends meet, putting additional burdens on the job market.¹⁰ Part of the solution to cyclical unemployment is to reduce poverty.

13.6 Australia has a moral responsibility to ensure that its economic well being is not at the expense of the needs of less developed nations. Australia cannot simply pursue its own interests in the global economy, but must ensure that it acts both justly and compassionately in its trade and economic policies. Australia should encourage initiatives such as international guidelines for global business, which are being considered by the UN Commission on Transnational Corporations.

13.7 Eliminating long term unemployment is a priority issue.¹¹ There is need for special labour market programs aimed at bringing long term unemployed people back into employment.¹³ There is also need to help people early in their unemployment, to reduce the risk of them becoming long term unemployed. While government has a

responsibility to provide suitable labour market programs, employers have a responsibility not to discriminate against long-term unemployed.

13.8 There is need for an active industry development strategy.¹⁴ Measures such as provision of training and micro-economic reform alone will not provide the jobs which are necessary to keep up with the increasing numbers of people looking for work. There is a need for industry development to provide jobs and limit our foreign debt. This involves cooperation between government, business and unions. The taxation system should be modified to encourage productive rather than speculative investment.

13.9 There is a need for deliberate policies to ensure that wealth created through greater productivity and efficiency is transmitted through the economy to create the jobs which most need to be done, eg to provide new or refurbished infrastructure, better caring services, and so on.¹⁵ Economic growth and micro economic reform by themselves will enrich particular industrial sectors but not lead to additional employment.¹⁶ The taxation system and the public sector have a role to play in this.

13.10 There is need for government, business and union policy to take account of the long-term personal, social and economic costs of restructuring (long-term inefficiencies) as well as the short-term apparent increase in efficiency. Business has a responsibility to avoid retrenchments if possible.¹⁷ If retrenchments become necessary, business and government have a responsibility to handle them in a way which minimises the cost to workers and their families and which ensure that notice, support (counselling, financial support eg for relocation) and retraining available to workers. Government should weigh the cost of active employment strategies, such as subsidies to business, against these long-term costs.¹⁸

13.11 Care for the environment can create jobs - caring for the land, planting new

forests, regenerating bushland, improving the urban landscape and reducing pollution, and so on. Much of the work involved in caring for the environment is more labour intensive than work which damages the environment.¹⁹

13.12 Business has responsibilities in reducing unemployment. Unemployment is sometimes the result of business decisions and practices, including restructuring and mismanagement.²⁰ Business has a responsibility to choose options which minimise negative social impacts, such as cutting costs by other means before resorting to "downsizing", and retraining workers to use new technology rather than discarding their old workforce.

13.13 There is need to deal with unemployment in regions, as well as nationally.²¹ Unemployment is worse in some regions than others. The cost of stimulating economic activity in these regions should be borne by society as a whole, and not by unemployed people.

13.14 Unions have a responsibility towards the unemployed, as well as towards their own members. They have a responsibility to ensure that changes in the economy are widely shared, and do not only benefit a small elite of workers. They also have a responsibility to work with government and business in planning for the future in a way which promotes full employment, at adequate wages and conditions, in an ecologically sustainable economy.

13.15 Moves towards more flexible employment such as worksharing, part-time and casual work need to be made in a framework which ensures workers have adequate income and working conditions.

13.16 It is important to move beyond valuing people only for their paid work and to create new a new consciousness as to what it means to live in a community where people are valued for who they are and distribute resources

accordingly. We need to learn to love our neighbour.²²

¹ Larwill K comments "Recent experience in many European economies shows 'respectable rates of growth accompanied by still high, or even rising, unemployment (Crossly 1990 p 14). In fact it has been argued that increases in productivity cost effectiveness and national prosperity can even be inversely proportional to employment growth (Crossly, 1990 p14). that is, they can lead to a decrease in the employment growth." (*Unemployed Australia* Brotherhood of St Laurence, 1992, page 38). For many years Australia has had overall economic growth, but the number of unemployed has also grown, as has the disparity between low and high incomes (Bob Gregory).

² Much restructuring of industry is about introduction of technology and productivity increases which result in much more efficient production, ie greatly increased output with a reduced workforce.

³Bob Gregory, "Structural Changes and the Australian labour market over recent decades" in *The Future of Work* Australian Council of Social Service, Sydney 1993, makes a major point of this: "There are dangers associated with too rapid and radical deregulation of the labour market" (p 65). Layard, Nickell and Jackman, *Unemployment* Oxford University Press, 1991 suggest that the highly unionised, highly centralised wage fixing system of Scandinavia/Austria is a better model than the low unionised, low centralised system of the USA, which they consider "harsh". Green, Mitchell and Watts also challenge the view that deregulation of the labour market will reduce unemployment.

⁴ As proposed by people like A Pollard, "Overtime for booms, undertime for recessions" *Australian Economic Trends* No 311, April 1992, will not work, because many people work long hours for low income, and cannot afford to reduce their hours. Such a scheme only works for relatively well paid people. S Rees and G Rodley have proposed a more workable scheme, dependent on income support

supplement, in "The Provision of Full Employment" in Rees, Stuart; Rodley, Gordon; Stilwell, Frank *Beyond the Market* Pluto Press, Leichhardt, 1993.

⁵ The importance of maintaining the public sector in combating unemployment is maintained by a number of economists, including John Nevile, Harold Levien "Australian Economic Policy - A Critique" in *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 29 may 1992

⁶ The basic policy principle from the attached report - the organising framework in which other principles then fit.

⁷ There are several overseas models which would have relevance to Australia, including the Swedish model, which is commended by Layard, Nickell and Jackman, *Unemployment* Oxford University Press, 1991. See also Therbold, *Why some peoples are more unemployed than others* Verso, London, 1986 who points out that the goal of full employment can be reached in a variety of economic systems, if the commitment to full employment is institutionalised.

⁸ See Department of Industry, Technology and Resources *Increasing Australia's Competitiveness*, Victoria 1987.

⁹ Phil Raskell, SPRC, at Christian Forums for Justice Seminar on unemployment, June 1992.

¹⁰ Belinda Probert *Working life*, McPhee-Gribble Melbourne 1989 comments that in the USA a family needs two jobs in the low paid work area of waiters, fast-food workers, sales clerks, cleaners and secretaries, to provide the same income as in one unionised industrial job.

¹¹ This is widely accepted in the literature. It has been found that even when unemployment decrease, the pool of long term unemployed persists, and may even increase. New jobs tend to go to new labour market entrants, not the long term unemployed.

¹² Peter Saunders in "Employment growth and poverty" in Johnson M et al, *Contemporary Issues in Australian Economics* (The Economic Society of Australia, South Melbourne 1991) has shown that increases in jobs may be

accompanied by increasing unemployment, with jobs going to new entrants into the workforce rather than the unemployed.

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¹⁴ See for example Green, R, Mitchell W and Watts M *Economics in Crisis: a proposal for jobs and growth* Evatt Foundation Sydney 1992. There are also a number of papers supporting some form of active industry policy in Michael Costa and Michael Easson (editors) *Australian Industry: what policy?* Pluto Press Leichhardt, 1991.

¹⁵ See for example John Nevile in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure, *Constructing and reconstructing Australia's infrastructure* AGPS Canberra, 1987.

¹⁶ eg Jill Byrnes and Geoff Harris, *Income and expenditure patterns in low income rural households: a pilot study* (Rural Development Centre, Department of Economics, University of New England, Armidale)

¹⁷ John Buchanan, Debora Campbell, Ron Callus and Malcolm Rimmer *Facing Retrenchments: strategies and alternatives for enterprises* DEET, AGPS Canberra 1992 provides a number of models for avoiding retrenchments and for handling retrenchments if they become necessary.

¹⁸ Jill Byrnes and Geoff Harris, *Income and expenditure patterns in low income rural households: a pilot study* (Rural Development Centre, Department of Economics, University of New England, Armidale)

¹⁹ See for example the Australian Conservation Foundation *ACF Job Creation Package* Fitzroy, 1994 Also comments on Environmentalists for Full Employment in Keith Suter *Employment as though people mattered* The Tasmanian Peace Trust 1991 Lecture

²⁰ Donnelly A *The GST and the Fightback Package* Boorong Publications Graceville East 1992. John Kerin, "Export Market Development Grant Program" in *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Backgrounder*, 3:11, 19 June 1992 cites a studies by the Hughes Committee, the

UNSW and AUSTRADE which shows that management often lacked export orientation, marketing skills and the ability to set directions for their companies.

²¹ See *Developing Australia: a regional perspective: a report the Federal Government by the Task Force on Regional Development*, chaired by Bill Kelty, AGPS, Canberra, December 1993. Also, article by Byrnes and Harris, cited above.

²²

Uniting Church In Australia

Rights of Nature and Rights of Future Generations Assembly, 1991

91.14.18 The Assembly resolved to adopt the resolution on the rights of nature and the rights of future generations:

We believe that God, the Creator, upholds human dignity. God has created the human in the divine image. No human authority can take away or contest the dignity thus bestowed upon the human.

We believe that God has blessed humanity and that God's faithfulness endures from generation to generation.

We believe that God loves the divine creation and wills the development of its life. No creature is indifferent in the eyes of God. Each has its dignity and thereby also its right to existence.

The Holy Scriptures attest to God's covenant with the creation. "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature" (Genesis 9:9-10).

In view of the fact that this promise is today being undermined by human lack of moderation,

- we affirm the inalienable dignity of all humans and call for the recognition and guarantee of human rights throughout the world,
- we express the conviction that those who live today share responsibility for the ability of future generations to live in dignity,
- we support the attribution of rights not only to humans but also to nature, God's creation, and
- we reject the view that animate and inanimate nature are mere objects which

stand at the arbitrary disposal of the human.

We call upon the churches to make room for God's covenant with creation within the realm of law by committing themselves at all levels to recognition of the following "Rights of Future Generations" and "Rights of Nature".

A. Rights of Future Generations

Future generations have a right to life.

Future generations have a right to an unmanipulated human genetic inheritance, that is, a genetic inheritance not artificially altered by humans.

Future generations have a right to a rich plant and animal world, and thereby a right to a life within an abundant nature and to the preservation of multifarious genetic resources.

Future generations have a right to healthy air, to an intact ozone layer, and to the sufficient thermal exchange between the earth and space.

Future generations have a right to clean and sufficient waters, and, in particular, healthy and sufficient drinking water.

Future generations have a right to healthy and fertile soil and to healthy woodland.

Future generations have right to substantial reserves of non-(or only very slowly) renewable raw materials and energy sources.

Future generations have the right not to be confronted with products and wastes of earlier generations that threaten their health or require excessive expense for protection and control.

Future generations have a right to "cultural inheritance", that is, to an encounter with the culture created by earlier generations.

Future generations have in general a right to physical living conditions that allow them a humanly dignified existence. In particular, they have a right not to be forced to accept physical alterations deliberately produced by their predecessors that inordinately restrict their

individual and collective self-determination in cultural, economic, political, or social respects.

B. Rights of Nature

Nature — animate or inanimate — has a right to existence, that is, to preservation and development.

Nature has a right to the protection of its ecosystems, species, and populations in their interconnectedness.

Animate nature has a right to the preservation and development of its genetic inheritance.

Organisms have a right to a life fit for their species, including procreation within their appropriate ecosystems.

Disturbances of nature require a justification. They are only permissible

- when the presuppositions of the disturbance are determined in a democratically legitimate process and with respect of the rights of nature,
- when the interests of the disturbance outweigh the interests of a complete protection of the rights of nature, and
- when the disturbance is not inordinate. Damaged nature is to be restored whenever and wherever possible.

Rare ecosystems, and above all those with an abundance of species, are to be placed under absolute protection. The driving of species to extinction is forbidden.

We appeal to the United Nations to develop a new Declaration which explicitly protects the rights mentioned above. Simultaneously, we appeal to the individual nations to incorporate these rights into their constitutions and legislation.

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- UnitingCare NSW.ACT
<http://unitingcarenwact.org.au/>

(social justice page)

- National Assembly Uniting Church in Australia

<http://assembly.uca.org.au/home/index.htm>

resources section has Basis of Union and other relevant documents

- National Social Responsibility and Justice

<http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/NSRJWeb.html>

Andrew Dutney *Playing God* (about UCA approach to ethical questions)

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