

# Synod Advocacy Report

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Our church's work of advocacy and its alignment with the Synod Strategy: *Future Directions for the People of God on the Way.*

## PROPOSAL

The 39th Synod:

1. Receive the Synod Advocacy Report and note the ongoing advocacy in Drug Law Reform, Climate Change and Aged Care
2. In response to ***Extended care for young people in care:***
  - a. Endorses the Homestretch campaign to increase the age of foster care support from 18 to 21;
  - b. Acknowledges that young people in out of home care deserve more support to the age of 21, through new innovations such as including a youth development coach from age 15 like that provided by the Uniting NSW.ACT Extended Care program;
  - c. Endorses advocacy to government by Uniting NSW.ACT to seek to secure such supports for young people in New South Wales; and
  - d. Encourages and facilitates members and councils of the church to participate in such advocacy, including through Uniting Church congregations with young people in their areas in out of home care.

## Purpose of this paper

In April a group of leaders from the Synod, church boards, parish missions and Uniting met to consider the role of advocacy and work for social justice in light of the church's vocation to be a fellowship of reconciliation "within which Christ may work and bear witness to himself", as the Synod *Future Directions* strategy describes it. That gathering expressed pride in the way our church has taken seriously the call to "do justice" in responding to many pressing social issues over the last 40 years. It affirmed the importance of remaining faithful to that call. Though many issues were named, the importance of speaking up about recognition and reconciliation with First Nations peoples, without speaking *for* them, was highlighted. The gathering also emphasized the need to continue to inform, equip and engage Uniting Church members and congregations in speaking and acting on issues of social justice, peace and care for creation. It urged those involved in work for justice to make more explicit how this work is part of the church's wider mission of witness to the Gospel and to be a sign of God's reconciling love for the world. This paper seeks to build on that discussion and those convictions. It aims to:

- Affirm the role of advocacy and work for social justice, peace and the environment as an essential element of the church's mission and of Christian discipleship;
- Describe the current advocacy priorities, and how work to achieve change within those priority areas is undertaken;
- Highlight how the work of advocacy and the current priorities align with the new Synod strategy, including:
  - How the work of advocacy both supports and is an integral element of the church bearing witness;
  - How the current advocacy priorities are informed by and give effect to the Synod's direction setting commitments; and
  - How the work of advocacy contributes to the Synod Growth Goals.

## The place of advocacy and social action in the mission of the church

The Uniting Church finds its mission in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. The Basis of Union describes the breathtaking goal of God's mission as "reconciliation and renewal.....for the whole creation".<sup>1</sup> But how are we to understand this? What does it look like? Christians believe that the never-ending love of God and God's desire for peace and reconciliation is embodied in the life and mission of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Jesus described his mission, drawing from the prophet Isaiah, as bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus' call to the church is to continue that mission (John 20: 21-22). He taught that our faithfulness to God is expressed not only in the fidelity to the first commandment, to love God with our whole being, but in the embracing the second, to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.<sup>2,3</sup>

### Key elements of mission

The Uniting Church understands that the mission of reconciliation and renewal it is called to has many aspects and that there are many ways in which we are to love our neighbours. Very broadly, we can distinguish witness and evangelism, acts of service and compassion, and work for justice as elements of mission and love of neighbour.

In evangelism we share our faith in Jesus and his message of the love and reign of God and call to discipleship. We are asked to... “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). This may open up opportunities for others to consider their own response to God and perhaps more consciously become part of God’s people and follow in the way of Jesus.

The Gospel writers frequently described Jesus as responding to people with ‘compassion’.<sup>4</sup> He was moved by the sight of human need whether the need was for food, healing, restoration or liberation from some oppression. His compassion led to action to meet that need. In the same way the church is asked to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and imprisoned, liberate the oppressed and stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalised.<sup>2</sup> This compassionate meeting of different human needs, our church’s social service, of course happens in many ways, through individuals, by congregations in their own fellowship and local communities, and through the church’s social service programs such as parish missions, Uniting and others. In recent decades we have increasingly recognised that compassion must be extended to our non-human neighbours, as well as our human ones, and embraced care for the whole creation which God loves.<sup>5</sup>

Justice has been described as ‘what loves looks like in public’. Work for justice has an eye to the causes of the need that we seek to meet in individual acts of compassion and asks, ‘why is this happening?’ and ‘what needs to change to stop it, not just for this one person, but for all those affected?’ In this work we move from acts of compassion to political and economic activity, from seeking to care for individuals and families to seeking to transform the structures of society, from works of mercy to the quest for justice. This is the church’s prophetic witness, or social advocacy, where we call for God’s desire for reconciliation and transformation to begin to become a reality now, in anticipation of that final reconciliation and renewal which is God’s purpose for the whole creation. In prophetic witness the church challenges those structures and systems that wound, break or distort our human community or the life of the planet.<sup>6</sup> Our social advocacy involves both a speaking out against those systems and practices that diminish, undermine or violate our essential human dignity, and a calling for those things that support that dignity and enable the flourishing of human beings and all creation. This reflects the subversive dimension of the Gospel message, something that was recognized in the Uniting’s Churches founding Statement to the Nation.

*Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is 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.<sup>7</sup>*

Some Christians are more comfortable with social service than social action, with acts of compassion than public advocacy and the work for justice.<sup>8</sup> But genuine Christian social concern will embrace both. Jesus did not only heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, he publicly challenged the Sabbath rule that prevented his healing (Mark 3:1-6). The church’s socio-political action looks beyond persons to structures: for example, beyond helping one child to attend pre-school, to reforming the early education system so that all young children have equal access to it; beyond assisting the homeless to transforming the policies that make housing unaffordable for so many. The issues are inextricably connected. It makes no sense to separate them, to attend to one and not the other.

All of the aspects of mission noted above are responses to Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves. If we truly love our neighbour we will want to witness the love of God and the hope that we have found in the gospel message, as we have opportunity. But equally if we truly love our neighbour we cannot stop there. For the neighbour we are called to love is not just a spiritual being, but a physical and social being as well. If we love our neighbour as God has created them, we must be concerned with their total welfare. This concern for the whole human being is evidence of the genuineness of our faith.<sup>8</sup> There is a consensus in the New Testament writings that true faith issues in love, and true love issues in service, whether this is the service of sharing faith, showing compassion or working for justice. As then Assembly Theologian in Residence, Rev Dr Ji Zhang has written:

*"Our constant vocation is to love God and our neighbour. The rest is detail."*<sup>3</sup>

### **Uniting's role in social justice advocacy**

The Synod of NSW/ACT delegates particular responsibilities for social justice advocacy to Uniting. These responsibilities are described in the Synod By-Laws and include:

- Researching important issues in society, especially as they relate to peace, justice and the common good;
- Assisting councils of the Church and the members of the Church to relate the Christian faith to issues in society;
- Developing policies on community service and social justice issues;
- Making public statements on community, social responsibility and social justice issues;
- Engaging in the political processes on behalf of the Church and seeking to influence change and reform, especially on behalf of people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged;
- Working with Uniting Church groups, other churches, faith organisations and community organisations to promote social justice and social responsibility issues, and;
- Relating to Government departments and instrumentalities and working with them to affect a just, inclusive and compassionate society

Note: The document *The Theological Foundations of our Advocacy* provides an explanation of the principles that shape how Uniting undertakes those responsibilities. It can be requested at [advocacy@uniting.org](mailto:advocacy@uniting.org)

### **Our current advocacy priorities**

Uniting's current priorities in advocacy are described below. Most of these have arisen from the concerns of and experience of Uniting Church members, consultation with the Synod leadership and other councils of the church or from a specific resolution at a Synod meeting. At times a justice issue emerging from the practice of Uniting's services, or which is the subject of new or changed government legislation, demands greater attention. Quite often most, if not all these factors, contribute to the choosing of an issue as an advocacy priority.

## Fair Treatment campaign

This year marks five years since the Synod resolved for Uniting to lead an advocacy campaign for drug law reform. The campaign has two main aims: 1. greater investment in drug treatment programs and 2. the decriminalisation (removal of criminal penalties) of personal possession and use of small quantities of illicit drugs.

The Fair Treatment campaign grew from this resolution and followed personal testimony of committed church members with lived experience and years of running the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross. The campaign calls for a change to unjust laws that cause harm to people in our communities and further perpetuate the shame and stigma surrounding dependency. It also seeks to ensure that there is treatment available to every person that wants it, including mothers with children and people in rural and regional areas.

The campaign supports a more honest and open conversation about alcohol and other drugs. It seeks to work with other organisations and Government to find more sensible, evidence-based solutions that are more in-line with community values and that will provide better outcomes and support for individuals and their families - particularly young people and those from First Nations communities.

While there is majority support for drug law reform in the community, it remains a highly stigmatised issue which is exploited by some sections of the media. The campaign has sought to counter this through telling a fuller story of people using illicit drugs, such as through the film *Half A Million Steps* and in the development of leaders in the campaign with lived experience of drug use and dependency. At the same time, we have been educating and building relationships with decision makers to make the case that a health-based approach to drug use is well supported by evidence and is the right thing to do.

The campaign has built an impressive partnership of more than 66 organisations representing the non-profit, medical, legal, union and community sectors, as well as other church bodies supporting its work. The campaign has also been well supported by the wider church, for example, 14 congregations across NSW have hosted screenings of the film *Half a Million Steps*.

A lot has already been achieved and Uniting Church members and congregations have been a critical part of this. Last year, the NSW Treasurer announced ongoing funding for a much-needed drug rehabilitation facility in Dubbo. Fair Treatment campaigned with the local community for this facility and highlighted the desperate situation for people seeking treatment in rural and regional areas. The local Uniting Church and community were instrumental in this decision, but people from 13 other congregations made calls and sent emails to their local MP on the issue in the lead up to the State Budget. Another critical moment was a meeting that Epping Uniting Church hosted with their local member, the Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, an action prompted by their screening of *Half a Million Steps*. The Treasurer personally acknowledged the role of the campaign and Uniting Church congregations in securing this funding.

In March this year, the Fair Treatment campaign headed to the halls of NSW Parliament to launch a discussion paper; 'Possession and Use of Drugs: options for Changing the Law'. This paper is aimed at breaking down some of the complexities around drug law reform and serve as a foundation for broader conversation about how changes to the law could work, what they would look like in practice and why we should re-think our approach to drug use. Various MPs, including State Treasurer and Deputy NSW Liberal Leader Dominic Perrottet, Independents, members of Labor and the Greens attended the event which was at maximum capacity. Our congregations are involved in this ongoing work. For example, on

April 14, Engadine Uniting Church hosted a community forum on the Fair Treatment campaign with the NSW Attorney General Mark Speakman.

This work of patient persuasion of our political leaders is fundamental to the theory of change that underlies the Fair Treatment campaign. Over time, and on the basis of solid data, the experience of those most directly affected by illicit drug use and growing evidence of the public's desire for drug law reform, we seek to persuade politicians of all stripes, that reform is a sensible, inevitable and compassionate decision to make. As a church we know first-hand the benefits of taking such action, as the example of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre shows, though it may have seemed risky at the time.

In May, the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) celebrated 20 years of service. Since it was opened by the Church in 2001, staff have supervised over 1.2 million injections and managed over 10,500 overdoses, without a single death. The Centre has saved countless lives and helped over 18,000 people onto the path of recovery and rehabilitation through referrals to health and rehab services. By supporting the work of MSIC we are following in the tradition of the church, by enacting Christian service as integral to Christian discipleship. This is fundamental to our mission of following in the way of Jesus, by recognising the inherent value in every person and welcoming them exactly as they are.

### **Synod Climate Action Strategy**

The Synod Climate Action Strategy (SCAS) grew out of longstanding concerns among Uniting Church members for the environment. Data from the 2016 National Church Life Survey showed that over eight in 10 people attending the Uniting Church agreed that caring for the earth should be an essential part of the mission of the church. A similar number believed there was a moral obligation to be active on environmental issues.<sup>9</sup>

In 2019 the Synod meeting, amidst growing concerns about global warming across the community, voted overwhelming to develop a Synod Climate Action Strategy. The Synod resolved to:

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

The first phase of the strategy has been completed and much has been achieved (see report to the April session of Synod 2021), with over 40 Uniting church members, mostly volunteers, involved across the five initial task groups. While the goals above remain, it was timely to revisit the way we give expression to them. Consequently, the Synod Climate Action Strategy *Future Directions* planning conference was held on Saturday March 20. Despite torrential rain around 90 Uniting Church members participated in the day either on-line or in person. The aim of the conference was to determine the priority focus areas for the next phase of the Strategy. Part of that involved considering what the Uniting Church Synod of NSW/ACT has distinctively to offer in the effort to achieve better public policy and practice around global warming and related issues. Several key themes emerged from the conference which have been further refined in conversation with the conference organising group and other interested church members:

- Putting our values into action: There was agreement we need to take more purposeful action consistent with the value of caring for creation. There was agreement we need to do better at engaging our congregational members to share their values and concerns about the environment and action on global warming with their elected representatives.

- Growing leaders and networks: This was about supporting existing leaders in voicing the church's position on climate related issues in the public sphere and nurturing emerging leaders to do this. In particular, the conference agreed we need to promote the perspectives and voices of Pacific Islander communities, First Nations peoples and youth within the church and wider community.
- Reaching out across difference: If the church is to be a sign of the coming reconciliation what does this mean in communities that are divided in their response to global warming, energy policy, the fossil fuel industry and related concerns? What role can we have in bringing people together, listening to concerns and finding common ground? The aim here is to identify a community where we can actively contribute to bridging current divides and agree on common solutions to the climate challenge.

In response to the above consensus, activities supporting the May 21 School Strike 4 Climate events, such as the Uniting Church worship service prior to the Sydney march, were led by young people from Christian Students Uniting and Uniting Church Schools, as well as representatives of First Nations and Pasifika communities within the Uniting Church. Two other related projects to advance the above directions are to:

- conduct a Federal advocacy campaign on climate issues in the lead up to the next election, which will seek to inform and engage church members across the Synod; and
- develop a network of local climate action leaders across congregations and presbyteries. They will be conduits of information to their congregation and support the congregation to take agreed action in line with the SCAS and with the congregation's own environmental concerns.

Work remains to be done to identify other concrete tasks for the next phase of the Strategy and this will happen in discussion with a cross section of church members and bodies in coming weeks.

## **First Nation's peoples**

Since its inception the Uniting Church has been on a journey of evolving awareness and learning what it means to walk together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) people. In 1985 the Uniting and Aboriginal Islander Christian Congress was established. The UCA's 1988 Bicentennial Statement expressed a desire for 'newer Australians' to stand with Aboriginal peoples. It was followed by the Covenanting Statement in 1994, which acknowledged the church's role in the harmful policies and the suffering visited upon First Nation's peoples in the past and made a renewed commitment to move to a united future. In 2009 the Uniting Church's constitution was revised to acknowledge First Nation's peoples. More recently, the 2019 meeting of the NSW.ACT Synod resolved that our church listen to the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart. It urged our Commonwealth Government to follow the Statement's call for a First Nation's Voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution, followed by the establishment of a Makaratta Commission to further a process of truth telling about our history and agreement making between governments and First Nation's peoples.

Uniting participates in this wider UCA commitment to walk with First Nation's peoples both through its services and its advocacy. Around 6000 First Nation's peoples take part in Uniting's services and programs. The Ngumba-Dal (from a Wiradjuru word meaning 'as one') Aboriginal staff network provides a forum and voice for the more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff which helps shape Uniting's practice and organisational culture. The 2019 Reconciliation Action Plan takes this commitment further. It recognises the continuing sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples in NSW and the ACT and provides a guide for the flourishing of Aboriginal staff, the enhancement of services for Aboriginal

peoples and “to achieving real and lasting change ...for wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.”

Concern for the flourishing and self-determination for First Nations peoples doesn't just happen through advocacy focusing solely on First Nations peoples or issues. Because the effects of Aboriginal dispossession and disadvantage are so pervasive, addressing them must be a consideration interwoven into all of Uniting's existing advocacy priorities and campaigns. For example, the second phase of the Synod Climate Action Strategy will promote First Nations voices and perspectives on climate change and care for country. The Fair Treatment campaign is acutely conscious of the different treatment that Indigenous people receive regarding illicit drug use than non-Indigenous people. For example, data from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research shows that between 2013 and 2017 82.55% of all Indigenous people found with a small (non-indictable) quantity of cannabis were pursued through the courts, compared with 52.29% for the non-Indigenous population.<sup>10</sup> NSW police have the option to apply a caution for non-indictable offences, but this legal provision is not applied equally. Data shows police were four times less likely to give a caution for Indigenous people (11.4%) than for non-Indigenous people (40.03%) found to have small amounts of cannabis.<sup>10</sup>

This is all part of the larger problem of increasing incarceration generally and over representation of Indigenous people in jail in particular. While incarceration rates are increasing overall, the proportion of Aboriginal people in jail has doubled over the last 30 years, from 14.4% to 29%.<sup>11</sup> As previous Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner has stated, this is a problem for our whole community, as incarceration entrenches disadvantage. Tickner argues that the majority of those in jail come from circumstances of unemployment, family breakdown, poverty, disability and poor physical and mental health.<sup>11</sup> These disadvantages are also true of First Nations people in jail but their adverse impacts are compounded by the additional wounds of dispossession and marginalisation that Indigenous people face. All these factors are reasons why the Fair Treatment campaign is working to divert people with problematic illicit drug use away from jail and into effective treatment programs instead.

The Advocacy team will continue to work with First Nations people to determine the ongoing priorities of these campaigns in line with the Synod strategy.

### **Extended care for young people in care**

Sadly, some young people in our community end up living with trauma and apart from their family while they grow up. When that happens, part of our role as a caring society is to support them by providing out of home care. Consistent with the trauma and disadvantage experienced by First Nations communities that was noted above, Aboriginal children are massively over-represented among young people in care. Across Australia Indigenous children are 9.7 times more likely to be living in care than non-Indigenous children. In NSW Indigenous children make up a staggering 40 % of all children living in care.<sup>12</sup>

We may know from our own experience of leaving home, or from our own children, that while a small proportion of young people are ready to go out on their own at 18, most are not, even those that come from stable family homes. It is increasingly recognised that providing care only up until the age of 18 years is inadequate and does not provide the firm foundation most young people need to flourish. Young people in care say how leaving care at 18 gave them “the feeling of going off a cliff”. Having a system that provides every young person in out of home care a guarantee of care until 21 as one of a range of options available, better mirrors the safety net most young people have and need. The NSW Government is lagging behind other states and territories that now provide extended care support to the age of 21.



Existing NSW Government aftercare supports simply aren't enough. They are piecemeal and difficult to access and only offer help when young people leaving care are already in crisis. These young people deserve to be supported in a consistent way to create an independent life for themselves. This means doing something different by extending care, not just improving leaving care.

In this Synod both Wesley Mission and Uniting are active in their support for children and young people in out of home care environments such as Foster Care and Residential Care. Collectively, both organisations support around 1000 young people every night across NSW & the ACT.

Many organisations that provide out of home care are implementing a range of different programs to try to improve the transition to independence for young people and well as banding together as part of the *Homestretch* campaign to increase the foster care age from 18 to 21.

Uniting NSW.ACT has been trialling a program to support young people. As part of our social investment strategy, Uniting NSW.ACT has funded \$7.9 million to pilot for 60 young people in our care to improve their chances of success as they transition from foster care to independence and adulthood. The pilot program allows young people to continue to live with their existing Uniting carers or access other supported accommodation until the age of 21, rather than 18 years old, when State support generally ceases in NSW. This provides a safe home with the additional support of youth coaching from the age of 15 that integrates the interests and needs of young people with learning opportunities as well as wrap around assistance with health, well-being, education and employment services.

Uniting, with the support and encouragement of Wesley Mission, would like to see change to the out-of-home care system in NSW to improve the life outcomes of young people, and for this reason is bringing the following proposed resolution for consideration of the Synod:

**With 40% of the 16,884 children in out of home care as at 30 June 2019 being First Nations, Synod resolves to do more to support improvements in the out of home care system. Synod:**

- (i) Endorses the *Homestretch* campaign to increase the age of foster care support from 18 to 21;**
- (ii) Acknowledges that young people in out of home care deserve more support to the age of 21, through new innovations such as including a youth development coach from age 15 like that provided by the Uniting NSW.ACT Extended Care program;**
- (iii) Endorses advocacy to government by Uniting NSW.ACT to seek to secure such supports for young people in New South Wales, and;**
- (iv) Encourages and facilitates members and councils of the church to participate in such advocacy, including through Uniting Church congregations with young people in their areas in out of home care.**

## **Aged care**

Over the last two years many Australians have been shocked to hear of the stories of inadequate staffing and care, neglect and even abuse occurring within the aged care system. Paralleling these terrible stories was consistent evidence of the lack of financial viability of aged care providers and the need for root and branch reform of the whole aged care system. Uniting is convinced that a lack of valuing older people is a major cause of the inadequacies that the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has so comprehensively and disturbingly illuminated. While the worldwide COVID 19 has seen concerted effort to protect vulnerable older people in many countries, questions about our willingness to ensure the quality of life of our older Australians remains. Uniting is part of the national aged care campaign *It's time to care about aged care* and is briefing congregations in target Federal

electorates. Members are encouraged to support the campaign by signing the pledge here:

[www.careaboutagedcare.org.au](http://www.careaboutagedcare.org.au).

The Federal Government has responded to the final report of the Royal Commission in its Budget of May 11. Uniting will consider carefully the implications of the government's Budget announcements for our church's aged care services, and the sector as a whole, and bring a report for the consideration of the Synod at its August meeting.

## How does the work of advocacy align with the *Future Directions* of the Synod?

The new Synod strategy document, *Future Directions for the People of God on the Way*, affirms that the Uniting Church is 'a pilgrim people on the way to God's promised end.' It also notes the Uniting Church is in a different place that it was at the time of union. The social context and the church's own circumstances have changed. While some indicators speak of decline, the *Future Directions* document affirms the hope of renewal, and of the Uniting Church's continuing purpose in being a fellowship of reconciliation within which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. How does the work of advocacy align to that larger vocation of witness bearing as described in the Synod strategy? We will address this issue by making brief responses to three related questions:

- How does the work of advocacy contribute to the churches bearing witness and what is its relationship to other aspects of the church mission?
- How do the current advocacy priorities (described above) reflect and contribute to the Synod's direction setting commitments?
- How does the work of advocacy contribute to and provide expression for the Synod Growth Goals?

### **How does the work of advocacy contribute to the church's bearing witness and what is its relationship to other aspects of the church mission?**

The *Future Directions* document states that the church's witness to the Gospel has different accents and the church is to be a sign of God's reign in all its dimensions. Underneath that is the conviction voiced by the Uniting Church in its inaugural service that, "we bear witness to the unity of faith and life in Christ." In this view our faith sharing or evangelism, acts of compassion, practical service, care for the earth and prophetic ministry in the public square, are all means by which the church fulfills its vocation to be an instrument "through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself."

But what if we think of the question more narrowly? What if someone is asking what is the relationship between advocacy and work for social justice on one hand and bearing witness in the sense of personal faith sharing and evangelism on the other? Surely across the life of the church both will have an important place, though individuals and congregations may give one or other more emphasis and attention. For Uniting's part it is set aside as an agency of the church to focus on service and advocacy primarily rather than evangelism (although our Chaplains and Pastoral Practitioners do address people's spiritual needs and matters of faith). But across the life of the church both these dimensions of mission stand alongside each other. Neither has primacy over the other and neither is merely a means to the other. Neither has to justify itself in terms of the other for both are aspects of mission, both are expressions of a genuine faith that results in a reconciling love which reveals itself in service. While faith

sharing and work for justice are distinct aspects of mission, we can see how they may be related. Service in one dimension may support expression of the other. Witness to the Gospel may lead to work for justice and advocacy as those who come to faith are concerned to demonstrate the love and justice of God. And involvement in advocacy and work for justice by church members may lead to opportunities for them, especially as they work with others beyond the church in common cause (as is useful and increasingly necessary), to “give an account of the hope they have in them.”

### **How do the current advocacy priorities (described above) reflect and contribute to the Synod’s direction setting commitments?**

A commitment to rural and regional ministry: While it might not be immediately apparent, several of the advocacy priorities have relevance here. One of the two core goals of the Fair Treatment campaign is increased investment in drug treatment programs. Rural and regional areas have a great need for such programs as access is currently very limited, particularly for residential rehabilitation programs and for programs suitable for women with children. The impacts of climate change are being felt acutely in areas of country NSW not least in terms of impact on available water supplies in times of extended drought and in impacts on agriculture and the need to adapt farming practices to changing conditions. The Royal Commission into Aged Care has highlighted inadequate care and questions about the viability of many smaller aged care services, with a disproportionate number of these being located in rural areas.

A commitment to ministry to those born after 1970 (Pulse): The School Strike 4 Climate movement bears witness to the deep concern and anxiety many young people face about the future world they will inherit. It is their future and that of their children whose quality of life is under threat most from global warming. It was the voices of youth and young adults in the church that were so prominent in the Synod presentation which resulted in the creation of the Synod Climate Action Strategy. The plans for the next phase of the SCAS highlight the need to further promote the voices and perspectives of young people as the strategy unfolds.

A commitment to walking together with Australia’s First Peoples and to the Uniting Church Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress: As stated above, Uniting is committed to further work for reconciliation and the self determination of First Nation’s peoples. This will be evident in its own practice and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander staff within Uniting as well as participation in reconciliation initiatives of the Uniting Church, such as support for Recognition and response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. As noted previously, addressing the marginalisation of First Nations people that exacerbates their disadvantage across a range of social problems, is a regular and conscious part of Uniting’s response to those issues.

An ongoing commitment to the stewardship of the earth: This commitment is explicitly taken up in the Synod Climate Action Strategy. The SCAS is one of Uniting’s two main priority campaigns and Uniting will continue to work closely with the wider church to implement the strategy.

A commitment to being a contemporary, courageous and growing church proclaiming Jesus Christ in worship, witness and service: Uniting contributes to this commitment by working with and/or leading the wider church in addressing contemporary issues of social concern. In the past the Uniting Church has shown both courage and a willingness to take risks in following what it believes is the way of Jesus as it responds to human need and other issues of the day. The recent Synod workshop on advocacy (mentioned previously), reflected on the long list of such actions within the relatively short life of the

Uniting Church - championing the equality of women in church and society, action for peace and against nuclear war, concern for the environment, action on the rights of First Nations peoples and for LGBTQI peoples, and more. There was a sense of quiet satisfaction and pride as church members named these actions (though recognising the church record is mixed). This commitment to Christian social responsibility in turn shaped and informed the practice of Uniting which has *Courageous action*, *Boldness* and *Confronting injustice* as its core promise and values.

A core part of Uniting's work in advocacy is to support and engage Uniting Church members and congregations in responding to social justice issues. Sometimes this engagement is to do with our core Synod and Uniting campaigns such as the Synod Climate Action Strategy. For example, we supported Christian Students Uniting in organising 400 of the Uniting Church community (including 60 Uniting staff) in the first (pre-COVID) Sydney School Strike 4 Climate event of September 2019. Since then around 60 congregations have ordered and displayed climate themed banners, jointly funded by Uniting and Uniting Mission and Education, on their church buildings. More than 80 Uniting Church members took part in the solar panel information evening in March 2021. And many members and congregations have been active in two subsequent, on-line SS4C events (May and September 2020).

Informing and equipping members and congregations in advocacy and a broader range of issues is also part of our work. During 2020, the advocacy team conducted 17 on-line sessions, either issues briefings or versions of our writing to, or meeting with your MP training, designed to equip church members to speak up about the issues they care about. More than 200 participants from 27 congregations participated in these sessions. Our social justice e-news goes out each month to more than 800 subscribers, the vast majority of whom are Uniting Church members.

### **How does the work of advocacy contribute to and provide expression for the Synod Growth Goals?**

#### Activate: We will lead larger, healthy and younger congregations:

Uniting can most obviously address the health dimension of congregations by supporting congregation to give expression to concern for justice and prophetic ministry as essential dimensions of the church's mission. The advocacy team has a strong focus on engaging church members and congregations in its campaigns as well as finding ways to support members and congregations take action on the issues they are most concerned about. As noted previously such social involvement may lead to opportunities for other forms of witness (though it should not be pursued with this as the primary purpose). A church that puts its faith into action in the real world is inherently more attractive than a church that does not and its message is seen as more authentic. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once quipped, "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

#### Transform: We will engage with the community in transformative ways:

The comments in the *Future Directions* paper on this Growth Goal mostly highlight alignment between Uniting's services and the rest of the church. There is certainly scope for Uniting and the wider church to work towards common goals in service provision. But this no means exhausts the scope for transformational work. The Synod by-laws which delegate to Uniting its specific roles in social justice advocacy refer directly to the possibility of social change "to influence change and reform, especially on behalf of people who are vulnerable", to "promote social justice and social responsibility issues" and most emphatically, "to effect a just, inclusive and compassionate society." It is not only in the ultimate goal of social justice advocacy that transformation is possible. Increasingly the utilization of methods such as community organising, as employed through the Sydney Alliance for example, have capacity not

just to achieve positive social outcomes but to grow leaders, deepen members' convictions and enrich the vitality of the participating organisations in the process.

Amplify: We will amplify our influence by being a leading and respected Christian Voice on contemporary issues:

The Future Directions document explicitly related this growth goal to the work of advocacy and social justice: "Uniting and the Synod office will collaborate to develop key areas for advocacy with a particular focus on issues relevant to the first third of life (for example climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander rights)". One of the key intended outcomes of the Synod Climate Action Strategy is to "Position the Uniting Church as a respected climate leader". The SCAS has taken steps towards this by identifying and training other climate spokespeople who can speak out on climate issues from the perspective of particular regions and people groups within the church. As already noted the next phase of the SCAS has identified developing local climate action leaders as a goal. Other campaign priorities, notably, Fair Treatment and Extended Care, clearly have relevance for people in the first third of life.

Amplifying the voice and action of the church by engaging Uniting Church members and congregations in work for justice is a core concern of Uniting's role in advocacy. We seek to engage the wider church both in the priority campaigns identified by Synod and Uniting as well as support members and congregations in acting on the issues of peace, justice and the environment that they are concerned about. Regarding the former, Uniting supported Christian Students Uniting in mobilising around 400 church members and Uniting staff in the (pre-COVID) Sydney School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C) event in September 2019. The advocacy team has supported strong Uniting Church engagement in two subsequent on-line SS4C events in 2020 (May and September). Over that period the team distributed climate action themed banners to 60 congregations for display on their churches, a project jointly funded by Uniting Mission and Education and Uniting. And in March this year more than 80 church members attended a solar panel information evening for congregations and individual church members interested in installing solar panels.

More broadly, the Uniting advocacy team seeks to inform church members about a range of issues and to support and equip them in addressing their own justice concerns. The monthly justice e-news is distributed to around 800 subscribers, the vast majority of whom are Uniting Church members. In 2020, during COVID lockdown, the advocacy team conducted 17 on-line training sessions, with most being versions of the Writing to your MP or Meeting your MP training. These sessions aim to provide church members with useful information to enable them to have effective communication with their MP on the issues they or their congregation care about. Around 200 Uniting Church members from at least 27 congregations participated in this training.

Uniting values the opportunity to present this report on the work of advocacy it undertakes on behalf of the Synod, and how this work aligns with the Synod *Future Directions* strategy. We commend the report for the Synod's consideration.

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