

## **Australian Churches Ecological Taskforce – National Council of Churches**

for Document in Advance YM24, written by Wies Schuiringa

This Taskforce has a long mailing list and about 8 people attend regularly. The convenor is Mark Zirnsak, Senior Social Justice Advocate, Uniting Church, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. Mark is the driving force, drawing on a vast knowledge base. Other active members are from the Lutheran Church, Anglican Church in Southern Queensland, Catholic Church, Baptist Church, the Salvation Army and other Uniting Church people. The general secretary of the NCCA also participates.

Gerry Fahey (VRM) and Wies Schuiringa (NSWRM) were nominated to the Taskforce. Gerry has withdrawn since.

The report below was written by Mark Zirnsak for the NCCA triennial in June 2024, to be held in Adelaide.

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Australian Churches Ecological Taskforce (ACET) is a program of the NCCA. The ACET is governed by the NCCA Board and managed by the General Secretary of the NCCA.

The ACET was set up in March 2023 and has had six meetings, in March, June, July, September and November 2023 and April 2024.

The mandate of the Australian Churches Ecological Taskforce is to offer support and direction to the member churches of the NCCA to promote a shared Christian vision of our relationship of mutuality and interdependence with God's creation and that seeks reconciliation of all creation with God.

The ACET seeks to:

- engage and communicate with churches (NCCA members and others where possible) and church agencies on issues relating to ecological issues, including climate change;
- facilitate the NCCA and its member churches to have a strong moral voice in the domestic debate around responding to climate change and other ecological issues as agreed by the ACET Executive;
- assist with communication, information and resource sharing across churches in Australia. The resources will include a diversity of theological resources;
- seek to provide coordination between Australian churches on campaigning and advocacy activities in support of addressing climate change and other ecological issues; and
- collaborate with existing and emerging networks of stakeholders in the Australian environmental movement.

So far, the meetings have allowed participating churches to share information about events, programs and resources they are involved in related to environmental issues.

The members of the ACET agreed they should focus on the following actions:

- Share resources that have been produced by individual denominations and churches.
- Produce statements for church leaders to sign onto, with their involvement on the content.

- Encourage churches to divest from fossil fuel-related corporations. There would be value in developing a document to outline the parameters of what might be in a divestment statement.
- Publicise actions and events from the denominations and churches involved in the Taskforce.
- Produce joint submissions to government and Parliamentary inquiries and consultations.

There was agreement that the Taskforce does not need to do political actions on climate change, as that is what Australian Religious Response to Climate Change already does.

The Taskforce has made submissions to:

- The Parliamentary Committee inquiry into the *Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Equity) Bill 2023* in November 2023;
- The Commonwealth Government's inquiry into the reform of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* in March 2024; and,
- The Parliamentary Committee inquiry into the *Net Zero Economy Authority Bill 2024* and the *Net Zero Economy Authority (Transitional Provisions) Bill 2024*.

In January 2024, the Taskforce wrote to Minister Bowen urging that the transition to a net zero greenhouse gas emissions future be rapid, but with the least amount of human rights abuses possible. The Taskforce particularly raised concerns about the high risk of forced labour in solar panels manufactured in China. The Minister responded in April to thank the Taskforce for the letter and highlight the recently announced Solar Sunshot program that will seek to support the manufacture of solar panels in Australia free of forced labour risks.