

Submission by the Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church Western Australia

**Submission to the  
Western Australia Climate Health Inquiry**



**Social Justice Commission**  

---

**Uniting Church Western Australia**

**August 2019**

## **Introduction**

The Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Western Australia (UCWA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Western Australia Climate Health Inquiry. The UCWA is keenly aware of the urgent climate action needed to restrict global warming to 1.5°C as agreed to by the Australian Government at the COP21 meeting in Paris. The climatic impacts of Western Australia emissions intensive industries – particularly the rapidly expanding Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) sector is a primary concern for the UCWA. The UCWA is concerned for the welfare of many vulnerable people in our community, for the unique Western Australian environment that sustains us, and the impacts to the economy from growing impacts of the climate crisis.

## **For the sake of the planet and all its people**

The Uniting Church is committed to involvement in the making of just public policy that prioritises the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society. In 1977, the Inaugural Assembly issued a Statement to the Nation. In this statement, the Church declared “our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.” In relation to care for the environment, the statement said:

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.<sup>1</sup>

The Uniting Church believes that the natural environment is not merely a resource for the benefit of human beings but has intrinsic value as part of God's good creation. The Church's commitment to the environment arises out of the Christian belief that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a special relationship with the environment – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God. We believe that God's will for the earth is renewal and reconciliation, not destruction by human beings.

The Uniting Church regards human-induced climate change as a most serious threat to the future and integrity of life on earth. In 2006, the Assembly Standing Committee resolved to adopt the statement 'For the Sake of the Planet and all Its People: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Climate Change'.<sup>2</sup> In part, the statement declares:

It is increasingly the case that some humans consume the earth's resources whilst other humans pay the price. Australia must acknowledge that it has a responsibility to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. As long as we remain prepared to abuse the atmosphere and entire ecosystems for the sake of short-term economic gain for a few, we undermine our own future.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/uniting-church-statements/key-assembly-statements/item/511-statement-to-the-nation>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/environment/uca-statements/item/481-for-the-sake-of-the-planet-and-all-its-people>

The UCWA has long advocated for a transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. Earlier this year the UCWA Synod Standing Committee resolved by consensus the following statement that:

Noting:

- The latest research on the pace of planetary warming and the growing rate of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Western Australia, and;
- The significant policy development currently being undertaken by both the Western Australian State Government and the Western Australian Environmental Protection Authority;

The Uniting Church WA expresses its concern to the Western Australian Government regarding the approval of any new or expanded fossil fuel projects in Western Australia and requests their commitment to taking responsibility for Western Australia's role in limiting global temperature change to 1.5 degrees Celsius by;

1. Designing and implementing a state-wide strategy to reduce GHG emissions across all sectors of the economy that includes science-based targets to align with the Paris Agreement and requirements to offset emissions;
2. Designing and implementing transition plans to move away from fossil fuels in close consultation with workers and local communities connected to fossil fuel dependent industry.

### **Implications of climate change for health in Western Australia (WA)**

The UCWA has concerns for the most vulnerable members of the community who have the least capacity to cope with growing stressors from climate change.

Our care agency UnitingCare West currently sees over 200 people a day coming to its Tranby Centre for homelessness support. It can be expected that with increasing extreme weather events that are likely to occur with climate change that people who are experiencing homelessness, particularly rough sleepers, who often carry existing health and mental health conditions will have a limited ability to cope and are therefore more likely to suffer health complications or even death.

There are similar risks for the elderly and infirm who are more likely to suffer adverse health impacts during extreme weather events.

The UCWA's concerns also extend to the health, mental health and related economy of rural and regional areas. Should declines in rainfall across the South-West agricultural area we would expect to see farmers and farming communities suffer. The risk of bushfires also increases across the state which carries obvious health and mortality risks to affected communities. Furthermore, tourism dependent areas may be adversely affected if, for example there are further bleaching events to coral reefs along the west coast.

People living on low-incomes are another key a group the UCWA is concerned about. As climate change pressures, particularly through the increasing intensity, length and frequency of heatwave

events, add to demands on household energy use, it is likely that a growing number of people will experience detrimental impacts.

As the Western Australian Council of Social Services have highlighted in their 2019-2020 State Budget Submission, “Mounting unpaid bills and utility disconnections can have a significant impact on people’s wellbeing, from feelings of shame, the stress of trying to stretch their income as far as possible, and the difficult decisions they have to make as to what to prioritise, such as not eating or not cooling their homes during the heights of summer.”

People living in remote communities share these same burdens but with added complexity given the difficulties in accessing healthcare, the lack of access to basic services and supplies, and the higher cost of adaptation and maintenance of buildings and facilities due to remoteness.

The UCWA has a further concern that extends beyond our geo-political borders to our partner churches around the region. We are aware that as Western Australians, we have a responsibility as a high per-capita emitter of greenhouse gases to take immediate action to reduce our emissions to keep the global climate within a 1.5°C. This is not only in consideration of the health and wellbeing of our sisters and brothers in our partner churches around the region, but also as a protection against their displacement. It is not clear to the UCWA how the State Government, in collaboration with the Federal Government, is planning to cope with the likely increase in global refugee and migrant numbers arising from climate change. With impacts like increasing intensity of severe weather events, rising seas, water scarcity and associated conflict, it can be expected that significant numbers of people will be displaced. Given that the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide is already at an all-time high of 70.8 million people,<sup>3</sup> it is likely that Australia and Western Australia will be increasingly required to, and indeed has a responsibility to, accommodate people seeking safety. The UCWA thinks it therefore prudent for the State government to consider the subsequent impacts on all government services, including our health system.

**Protect the public from the harmful health impacts of climate change and strengthen the preparedness and resilience of communities and health services against extreme weather events, with a focus on the most vulnerable in the community**

The UCWA is aware of the State Government’s commitment to a homelessness strategy and encourages the inclusion of climate change as a risk factor to be considered within that strategy in consultation with social services sector.

The UCWA has also been advocating for initiatives to allow access to lower cost renewable energy for low-income households, particularly social housing tenants. Due to lower-incomes and not being home-owners, tenants living in private rentals or social housing are unable to access rooftop solar photovoltaic systems or battery storage. Tenants are therefore locked into paying higher prices which homeowners can otherwise offset with their own energy supply and storage. The UCWA would encourage the State Government to prioritise research and investment into a scheme similar to what has been implemented by the South Australian Government<sup>4</sup> where they are developing a Virtual Power Plant across their state housing network of 24,000 public housing properties. There

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf?fbclid=IwAR361o-KYMd4pVb480bWEC0yZOc8Gve3FD9bTK6ilExNcCN4FmLWTRdPbXg>

<sup>4</sup> <https://virtualpowerplant.sa.gov.au/>

are multiple benefits to such a scheme for community resilience, grid stability and reduced carbon emissions. A similar project trial is already underway in Kalgoorlie-Boulder<sup>5</sup> and we would encourage further exploration into the expansion of such a model across the broader social housing network in WA.

Alongside such an initiative, investment in energy efficiency retrofits, energy audits and education would also provide a valuable boost to the resilience of vulnerable households. The 2016 Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre Energy Poverty report<sup>6</sup> found that rental households, including public housing, were much less likely to be insulated, and that “over 60% of low income families surveyed indicated that they either frequently or occasionally curtailed their use of heating or cooling despite feeling discomfort.” Increasing climate impacts are likely to exacerbate this situation with obvious health implications unless proactively addressed with access and education schemes.

**Evaluate the likely benefits (health and wellbeing, social and economic) arising from climate change mitigation strategies, with a focus on WA health services.**

### ***Air Pollution – Greenhouse Gas Emissions***

In Australia, the energy sector is the largest source of pollution that causes climate change. Our coal power plants are specifically our single largest contribution to global warming. We therefore urge the State government to honour the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement under it, by phasing out our coal-fired power stations through a just transition process and showcasing our engagement and commitment to mitigate climate change. If we are to limit global warming to below 1.5° C, there is very little carbon budget remaining. The implications of this are that Western Australia cannot afford to delay any further and needs to undertake an urgent energy transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewables<sup>7</sup>. Increasing global investment in renewable energy also presents a case for the retirement of these stations and allows for a significant economic benefit to the State through the export of our abundant renewable energy resources.

With the gas sector in Western Australia already one of the major GHG emitters, it is incumbent upon the Western Australian government to plan and implement a transition away from all fossil fuels, rather than allowing the expansion of the gas industry into significant new fields.

It is deeply troubling that, according to the Climate Council report *Powering Progress: States Renewable Energy Race* released in October 2018, WA is the laggard when it comes to renewable energy policy and implementation.<sup>8</sup> Given the vast renewable energy resources available in WA the SJC believes we should instead be leading the way in transitioning to a renewable energy economy.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.drd.wa.gov.au/newsandevents/Pages/Goldfields-Solar-Energy.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/06/bcec-energy-poverty-in-western-australia.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Sivan Kartha, *Implications for Australia of a 1.5°C future*, Stockholm Environment Institute, Working Paper 2016-09.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/states-renewable-energy/>

Research suggests that stronger action early on climate change can reduce the total costs in high emission regions, often even if other regions choose not to take early action.<sup>9</sup> Research also indicates that strong action in support of reducing emissions would create more jobs than weak action<sup>10</sup> and that investing in clean energy creates three times as many jobs as investing in oil and gas.<sup>11</sup>

### **Concerns for the community**

Coal power stations are one of the most significant sources of toxic air pollutants that harm human health and local environments. In 2009, estimated costs of health damages associated with coal combustion for electricity in Australia amount to \$2.6 billion per annum<sup>12</sup>. The Social Justice Commission is concerned about the health impacts that these stations have on the community.

This concern is also carried for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) extraction, especially unconventional reserves extracted through hydraulic fracturing. Of particular significance is the impact fracking operations can have on water and air quality<sup>13</sup> as well as safety and psychological factors with increased industry traffic, noise and operations. People living and working in the areas with unconventional gas reserves deserve to be able to enjoy the clean and beautiful surrounds they are connected to and dependent on, without risk to their health or wellbeing.

### **Call for a fair and planned transition**

The Social Justice Commission recognises the need for a fair and planned transition. The aging profile of existing coal-fired generators means closures are inevitable within coming years. The Western Australian Government should accordingly be planning to replace old coal fired stations with renewables, and create a policy framework to support Australia's Paris commitments whilst simultaneously offering a lifeline to communities and workers who are currently dependant on existing coal fired generators.

We believe that a comprehensive plan is needed to ensure a smooth transition away from fossil fuels to renewable sources. Communities and workers should be at the heart of this plan.

We respectfully ask this enquiry to model the quickest and fairest way to facilitate a clean energy transition. Failure to do so will cost workers, communities, taxpayers and the environment itself.

---

<sup>9</sup> M. Jakob, G. Luderer, J. Steckel, M. Tavoni, & S. Monjon, 'Time to act now? Assessing the costs of delaying climate measure and benefits of early action', *Climatic Change*, 114: 1, 2012, pp. 79-99

<sup>10</sup> ACF & ACTU, *Creating Jobs – Cutting Pollution The roadmap for a cleaner, stronger economy*, 2010, p. 4 <http://us.popul8.com.au/clients/acf/map/>

<sup>11</sup> C Mims 'Government spending on cleantech generates three times as many jobs as oil and gas' *Grist*, 13 June 2011 <http://grist.org/list/2011-06-13-government-spending-on-cleantech-generates-3-times-as-many-jobs/>

<sup>12</sup> *Coal and Health in the Hunter: Lessons from one valley for the world*, Climate and Health Alliance Pg. 32.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00207233.2017.1413221>