

# **Social Justice Forum**

## **Submission to the White Paper on Foreign Policy**

February, 2017

## **The Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT Social Justice Forum and our response to the White Paper on Foreign Policy**

The Social Justice Forum (SJF) is a senior level committee of the Uniting Church, Synod of NSW and the ACT and of Uniting, the church's community services and advocacy arm. One role of the SJF is to identify social issues for the attention of the church in NSW and the ACT.

The Synod of NSW and the ACT has responsibility for oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship, witness and service in the state of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The Synod works to strengthen the faith, life and mission of the around 600 Uniting Church congregations and 14 presbyteries (district councils) within NSW and the ACT. Each week around 30,000 people attend worship services and actively participate in some way in the wider mission and service of the church.

### **Our social concern**

Our Synod theme is: Uniting for the common good. Since its inception the Uniting Church has upheld a commitment to social involvement as an integral part of its life and work.

*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. (Statement to the Nation, 1977)<sup>1</sup>*

Our church believes that it is called to recognise the essential dignity and worth of all people and to work for policies and practices that enable people across the globe to flourish. This includes the wise use of energy and protection of the world's natural environment. And as an Australian church, we have pledged ourselves to work for a nation 'whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all person's everywhere- the family of the One Go- the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave his life for others"<sup>1</sup>

At the same time we acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the Asian and Pacific region and we consider our nation has a significant role to play in this part of the globe as well. It is in the context of this dual sense of responsibility, both for our immediate region but also for the wider world, that we offer these comments to the White Paper Task Force.

We thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Government for this opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's agenda for international engagement over the next decade.

Contact Person: Rev Rick Morrell, Chairperson, Social Justice Forum

C/- Uniting Centre for Research, Innovation and Advocacy

PO Box 7137

Silverwater NSW 2128

Phone: [REDACTED]

Mobile: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

## **The issues we consider to be most important**

Below we have outlined a number of issues we believe should be reflected in Australia's engagement in our region and with the rest of the world. Many of these concerns echo arguments expressed in the submission provided by Uniting World, which is the international relief and development agency of the National Assembly (national council) of the Uniting Church in Australia. Our comments also draw from Statements made at previous meetings of the Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly.

The Social Justice Forum believes that Australia's international engagement in the coming decade should be characterised by:

### ***1. The balancing of Australia's interests with concern for the wellbeing of other nations and peoples, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable.***

The purpose of Australia's foreign policy must rightly include policies and actions designed to serve Australia's interests and secure benefits for the Australian people. But it must also embrace a concern for the welfare of all persons, including those in our region. The Uniting Church considers that God has provided gifts, resources and skills for the benefit of all humanity.<sup>2</sup> A broad view of Australia's interests will be marked by regard for the common good and a sense of interdependence with other peoples.<sup>3</sup> As the Uniting World submission notes ... "It is in Australia's interest to facilitate programs that build peace, stability and prosperity..." both regionally and across the globe. Australia has experienced the benefit of being a stable democracy whose government and institutions are shaped by the rule of law and values which reflect fundamental human rights and dignity. At our best our nation has a proud record in upholding such human rights nationally and championing them in the wider world. Continuing to do so is an essential aspect of our wider engagement and also the best way to ensure our own ongoing security and prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

### ***2. A firm resolve to reduce global poverty and inequality***

In recent decades international efforts have led to substantial decreases in the number of people, particularly children, living in extreme poverty. Efforts to raise levels of health and education, combat disease, improve the conditions of women, lift economic development, increase employment, enhance food production and ensure equitable trade and taxation arrangements in developing nations must continue. Poverty and gross inequality are socially harmful, personally demeaning and economically damaging. The Assembly of the Uniting Church has noted that no human rights are possible in the absence of all those things that make a decent life possible- adequate food and health care, meaningful work and fair pay, education, secure housing and a safe environment.<sup>2</sup> We support free and open trade among nations but recognise that the poorest and most vulnerable nations and peoples are often excluded from the benefits of trade and economic growth. We agree with our colleagues in Uniting World, that all our trade, financial and diplomatic arrangements should seek to ensure that the diverse benefits of economic growth and development are shared equitably within and between nations. One important way that Australia contributes to that goal is through its foreign aid program.

The Social Justice Forum, along with the wider Uniting Church, is deeply concerned that Australia's levels of foreign aid are reported to have fallen to their lowest levels ever- just 0.22% of Gross National Income<sup>5</sup>. For a wealthy nation such as Australia this is a truly lamentable figure. Yet the benefit of well-targeted and effective aid is clear. Professor Alan Lopez of the University of Melbourne has analysed data from the Lives Saved Scorecard to assess the impact of Australian aid to poor countries, focussing on child health. Professor Lopez calculated that every \$5400 of such aid directly contributed to saving a child's life.<sup>6</sup> His work estimated that through such aid, Australia has over the last 15 years contributed to saving the lives of 230, 000 children worldwide. What a wonderful impact! Professor Lopez said this analysis should give all Australians reassurance that "tax dollars spent on foreign aid really do improve health and wellbeing in poor countries..."<sup>6</sup>

Over the years Australia has made commitments to increase its level of foreign aid to 0.7% of GNI but has never reached this figure. Other developed nations have done so. Australia should, as a priority, take steps to lift its provision of foreign aid to 0.7%. The Federal Government should strive to achieve multi-partisan support for achieving that goal, but should do it regardless. In the past foreign aid appears to have been an easy target whenever the federal government of the day has needed to cut spending. From a Christian perspective, Jesus revealed that all the religious and ethical teaching on a person's obligations in life could be summed up in two commands, the second of which was to love your neighbour as yourself. Most Australians would still subscribe to that ethic even if they reject or are unsure about the belief about God that lies behind it. In the coming decades we need governments willing to commit to foreign aid, regardless of the domestic budget situation, and to call on the Australian people to reflect their best selves in supporting that commitment.

### ***3. A bold commitment to addressing climate change and encouraging international action to reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions:***

The Uniting Church believes that climate change poses a serious increasing threat to the future and integrity of life on earth.<sup>7</sup> The scientific evidence on global warming and its potentially disastrous consequences is now indisputable. It is also clear that human activity through the burning of fossil fuels and subsequent increase in greenhouse gas emissions is seriously exacerbating the problems of climate change. The threat posed by climate change challenges the way we live and its impacts will affect some of the world's poorest people first. The Uniting Church is particularly concerned for our Pacific neighbours, where small island nations are already vulnerable to a rise in sea levels, contamination of drinking water, damage to crops and fisheries and the devastation of extreme weather events. The Uniting Church believes that reduction of the world's greenhouse gas emissions is an immediate priority for international cooperation and national action.<sup>9</sup> Our nation can be a world leader in this area. We have world class scientists and we have a reputation and capacity for innovation. But in order for our voice to have credibility we must do more to reduce our own greenhouse emissions. Business and industry bodies are now joining the overwhelming consensus among scientists urging commitment to a low/no emission future and much greater reliance on renewable energy sources.<sup>8,9</sup> They are calling for bipartisan political support to develop new energy policy for Australia.<sup>9</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.<sup>7</sup> We must also recognise that by being prepared to abuse the atmosphere and entire ecosystems for short term economic gain we are undermining our own future and that of our children and their children. There can be no security for anyone without a healthy ecosystem. Our economic, social justice and ecological interests must combine to find shared solutions. As a matter of the utmost priority Australia's foreign policy should seek to secure international cooperation to address climate change and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. But this call must be matched by strong and resolute domestic action to reduce our emissions, including a commitment and plan to achieve net zero emissions before 2050.

#### ***4. Policies and action to reduce the threat, incidence and consequences of war and other armed conflict and move towards lasting peace between nations and peoples.***

War and other forms of violent conflict persist in many places across our world. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that in 2014 more than 180,000 people were killed in 42 conflicts across the world.<sup>10</sup> This represented a significant increase on previous years. The UK based Action on Armed Violence tracks the numbers of people killed solely by explosive weapons.<sup>11</sup> In 2014 and 2015 the numbers of people killed by explosive weapons were 41, 847 and 43, 786 respectively. The vast majority of those killed, more than 75%, were civilians. The devastating power of modern weapons and their indiscriminate use in highly populated areas has wreaked an enormous toll in death and destruction among civilian populations and infrastructure. The footage of the harms inflicted upon ordinary people in cities like Aleppo moved and horrified many Australians. The human toll among combatants in military conflict is also severe. The US Department of Veterans Affairs has identified some of the consequences of war among its service men and women.<sup>12</sup> Returned soldiers face high rates of unemployment, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress and homelessness. Nearly one million active American service people have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder and an estimated 22 veterans take their lives each day. There have been similar stories of the tragic mental health consequences for Australian veterans.

Recently the Catholic Church held an international conference in which there was a call for a move away from the traditional 'just war' approach in Christian theology.<sup>12</sup> This move recognised that in the modern world the conditions for this approach are seldom, if ever met. There is increasing recognition that the way of Jesus is that of non-violence. More churches are seeing the importance of this and advocating for alternative means of addressing situations of conflict and perceived injustice rather than resorting to violence and war. Reflecting this approach the World Council of Churches (WCC) has released a document "An Ecumenical Call to a Just Peace". It emphasises the close connection between justice and peace and states that, without the demands of justice being met, no genuine and lasting peace can be achieved. When issues of injustice are recognised, the seeds of conflict can be addressed and the risk of people resorting to violence reduced. The WCC acknowledges that the journey toward peace is difficult and that reconciling parties with long standing enmity is a fraught and painstakingly slow process. In some situations, 'just policing' may be required in order to protect civilian populations. Transforming conflict involves truth telling (recognising wrongs) and will involve change for each party. This is costly, but the consequences of war are far more costly. This tradition has clear implications for churches such as ours in promoting justice and peace. How

might this peacemaking ethic inform the foreign policy of the contemporary Australian state? There are both principles and practices which can be identified.

In a 2006 paper delivered at the conclusion of his time as General Secretary for the United Nations, Kofi Annan shared four lessons he had learned while in the post and which accord well with the reflections of the WCC.<sup>13</sup>

- The world's security is a shared responsibility. No nation can address the threats of nuclear proliferation, climate change or terrorism in its own
- The benefits of economic prosperity must also be shared. Every nation and people must have opportunity to share in the benefits of globalisation. This links closely to the truth highlighted by the WCC that there can be no peace without justice. In part the recent world trend toward isolationism and exclusive nationalism is a result of not sharing prosperity equitably.
- Human rights and the rule of law are the foundation of both security and shared prosperity. Our common humanity and human dignity must be recognised and protected by law.
- Governments must be accountable for their actions both internationally and domestically. There must be capacity for weaker and poorer nations to have their voices heard and have some influence over the actions of the strong and wealthy.

The Uniting Church affirms that it is committed to be a peacemaking body and to encourage political authorities to resolve political tensions by peaceful means.<sup>14</sup> In fulfilling aspirations to be a good global citizen and expressing the principles noted above we urge the Australian Government to reduce violence and enhance peace by:

- More intentionally addressing the roots of injustice and conflict through international development by aligning aid, debt relief and trade policies to address poverty, disease, illiteracy and other barriers to nation's wellbeing.
- Resolutely pursuing the resolution of conflicts through negotiation and diplomacy, wherever possible.<sup>14</sup> This will include taking a more independent approach to foreign policy and exercising extreme caution in assessing requests from powerful allies to join in armed conflicts.
- Advocating strongly for arms control regarding both nuclear and other weapons and participate actively in international arms monitoring arrangements. Genuine global security will only be achieved by ending the trade in illegal weapons, greatly reducing the production of weapons generally and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.<sup>4,12,14</sup>
- Actively pursuing measures to reduce the deaths of civilians in armed conflict and hold those accountable for the death and wounding of civilians accountable. One example of this is support for the United Nation's initiatives to monitor and limit the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The Social Justice Forum would be interested to know of any outcomes from the UN Security Council's Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians held on June 10, last year.<sup>15</sup>
- Encouraging the use of international law rather than military force. Australia can play an active role in calling for reform of existing or development of new mechanisms to better enforce international law and indict and prosecute those who commit war crimes and crimes against humanity.

- Where other nations which are violating human rights and international law have not responded to negotiation and diplomacy, Australia can cooperate with joint efforts to apply appropriate trade and other sanctions, rather than resort to military force. In some cases, where the protection of civilian populations is required, Australia could participate in international policing and peacekeeping missions.

## **5. A better way for refugees and people seeking asylum**

Our nation seems caught on the horns of a dilemma in response to people seeking asylum. On one hand there is growing disquiet at subjecting innocent men, women and children to the soul destroying cruelty of indefinite detention. Many recognise this betrays our best instincts. On the other hand we don't want to see a resurgence of the people smuggling trade and the prospect of many hundreds of people drowning at sea.

Recently many groups, including the Uniting Church in Australia, have urged our leaders to find a path through this dilemma. The Uniting Church Assembly has outlined its principles for policy in this area in Shelter from the Storm: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Asylum Seeker and Refugee Policy.<sup>16</sup> The Social Justice Forum, in support of those resolutions, urge that features of a better way should include:

### **➤ More humane processing – ending the harm of indefinite detention**

Holding asylum seekers in indefinite mandatory detention with no prospect of permanent settlement is inhumane and causes enormous harm. The vast majority of people on Manus Island and Nauru have been found to be genuine refugees. They should be allowed to resettle in Australia and start to rebuild their lives if no other suitable country offering permanent settlement can be found in the very near future. Those still to have their refugee status determined should be allowed to live in the community while this process occurs. These steps would be more humane, less costly and less damaging to Australia's reputation than the current policies.

This need not lead to a substantial increase in boat journeys and the risk of deaths at sea if other steps are also taken.

### **➤ A safer path to a secure future- taking a lead in our region**

Refugee experts agree we need to work with countries in our Asian region to develop long term solutions to what is a global refugee challenge. A regional refugee framework, developed cooperatively with countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, would include:<sup>16</sup>

- Access to a secure future in second stage countries: Currently, people seeking asylum transit through Asian countries because they see no long-term future there. They have no legal status, or access to work, health and education. If people are safe and have their pressing needs met they are more likely to remain where they are and avoid risky boat journeys.
- Fair, timely and transparent processing of protection claims: Agreements need to be reached about the proper processing of asylum claims under the auspices of the UNHCR. Currently the resources for this are inadequate and many asylum seekers are

not registered. Australia can help develop and fund a more consistent, transparent process.

- Increasing our national humanitarian intake: Australia has a proud record of humanitarian settlement. But as a wealthy nation and in the face of unprecedented numbers of refugees and displaced persons (65 million across the world), we can afford to do more. Increasing our annual humanitarian intake and committing to take a significant proportion from our region would signal our desire to act in good faith and set an example worth following. The National Assembly of the Uniting Church has called for the humanitarian intake to be increased immediately to 25, 000 and then progressively to 60, 000 per annum.<sup>16</sup>
- Working collaboratively to clamp down on people smuggling operations: Continued close cooperation with intelligence and police services in neighbouring countries is essential to disrupt people smuggling and prevent dangerous boat journeys.

➤ **Playing our part globally- addressing the causes of the refugee crisis**

Ongoing war and conflict around the world has seen millions of people flee their homes to escape violence and find safety and protection elsewhere. In light of this, we should be restoring and increasing aid and assistance to the UNHCR and other NGOs stationed in refugee source countries and surrounding host countries, to help them manage the large numbers of displaced people and cement our place as a responsible global citizen. However, as stated earlier, our commitment to international aid has fallen to among the lowest levels ever- around 0.22 % of GNI.<sup>5</sup> This falls well short of the target of 0.7 % of GNI for official development assistance which was first agreed to by wealthy nations such as Australia in 1970 and has been repeatedly re-endorsed since then.

There is growing recognition that the human and financial cost of our current refugee and asylum seeker policies cannot be sustained. There are alternatives and together we can find a better way, one that is more in accord with our best instincts, our responsibilities as a good global citizen and human rights treaties we have supported. This should be central priority for our foreign affairs policy in the coming period.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly. Statement to the Nation, Inaugural Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia. Available at: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/134-statement-to-the-nation-inaugural-assembly-june-1977>

<sup>2</sup> Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly. Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person. Eleventh Assembly, Resolution 06.20.01, July 2006. Available at: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/human-rights/uca-statements/item/484-dignity-in-humanity-a-uniting-church-statement-on-human-rights>

<sup>3</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly. An Economy of Life: Re-imagining human progress for a flourishing world. Twelfth Assembly, Resolution 09.21., July 2009. Available at: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/461-an-economy-of-life-re-imagining-human-progress-for-a-flourishing-world>

<sup>4</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly. Uniting for Peace. Tenth Assembly, Resolution 03.19.02, July 2003. Available at: <http://unitingjustice.org.au/uniting-for-peace/uca-statements/item/497-uniting-for-peace>

<sup>5</sup> Sydney Morning Herald. Matt Wade. Federal Budget 2016: Churches call on Scott Morrison to reverse foreign aid cuts. April 20, 2016. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/business/federal-budget/federal-budget-2016-churches-call-on-scott-morrison-to-reverse-foreign-aid-cuts-20160419-go9vxb.html>

<sup>6</sup> The University of Melbourne. The Melbourne Newsroom. Generosity of Australians has saved 230, 000 children, lives saved report card shows. 28 July, 2015. Available at: <http://newsroom.melbourne.edu/news/generosity-australians-has-saved-230000-children-lives-saved-report-card-shows>

<sup>7</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly. For the sake of the planet and all its people: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Climate Change. Assembly Standing Committee Resolution 06.102, November 2006. Available at: <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/environment/uca-statements/item/481-for-the-sake-of-the-planet-and-all-its-people>

<sup>8</sup> ABC News. Elysse Morgan. Energy Australia boss says national plan for renewable energy is solution to high power prices. February 14, 2017. Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-14/energy-australia-boss-worried-about-power-bills/8267070>

<sup>9</sup> ABC News. Peta Donald. Industry, environment, community groups demand bi-partisan energy policy. February 13 2017. Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-13/industry-groups-demand-bipartisan-energy-policy/8263928>

Social Justice Forum. Submission to the White Paper on Foreign Policy, February 2017.

<sup>10</sup> The Guardian. Global armed conflicts becoming more deadly study finds. May 21, 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/armed-conflict-deaths-increase-syria-iraq-afghanistan-yemen>

<sup>11</sup> Action on Armed Violence. Explosive Violence Monitor. Available at: <https://aoav.org.uk/explosiveviolence/>

<sup>12</sup> Just War, Just Peace. Rev. Dr. Chris Walker Blog, April 29, 2016. Available at: <https://revdrchriswalker.wordpress.com/2016/04/29/just-war-just-peace/#more-284>

<sup>13</sup> Kofi Annan. "What I've learned." Washington Post, December 11, 2006, cited in: Wallis J. Seven Ways to Change the World: Reviving faith and politics. HarperCollins Publishers: New York; 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly. Militarism and Disarmament. Third Assembly, Resolution 82.57, July 1982. Available at: <http://unitingjustice.org.au/uniting-for-peace/uca-statements/item/500-militarism-and-disarmament>

<sup>15</sup> Action on Armed Violence. Explosive Weapons and the Protection of Civilians: a briefing paper ahead of the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians, 10 June 2016. June 8, 2016. Available at: <https://aoav.org.uk/2016/explosive-weapons-protection-civilians-briefing-paper-ahead-un-security-council-open-debate-protection-civilians-10-june-2016/>

<sup>16</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly. Shelter from the Storm: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Asylum Seeker and Refugee Policy. Fourteenth Assembly. UCA: Sydney; 2015.