



The open-cut mine at Leigh Creek is a source of low-grade black coal. Photo courtesy of Gordon Smith.

Fossil fuel divestment and the Uniting Church

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At the October/November 2014 meeting of the Uniting Church SA Presbytery and Synod, members resolved to have a task group: “Undertake a six-month process of discussions with interested parties to look deeply into the matter of fossil fuels and the potential for divestment.” This task group, now known as the Environment Action Group, are to report back at the June 2015 Presbytery and Synod meeting. This article is one in a series they have undertaken for *New Times*.

Underlying the report being prepared for this meeting is a clear theological and ethical commitment to understanding that “the Earth is the Lord’s”, and that we have a responsibility to love and care for the world as God’s creation. With this goes the ethical and moral obligation to pass on to future generations a world that is liveable and able to support a wholesome life for all. Australia is one of the privileged nations in terms of its natural resources, but it is also a major contributor to global warming. Therefore, for us as Christians, climate justice demands a faith response. Our love must include a commitment to decreasing our greenhouse emissions and keeping global temperatures below the internationally agreed limit of 2°C above pre-industrial levels, thereby reducing the frequency and intensity of future climate-related disasters.

The last National Church Life Survey revealed that 80% of church attendees would like the Church to offer leadership and to speak up about environmental concerns. Therefore, the proposal that will go to the upcoming Presbytery and Synod meeting addresses the issue of fossil fuel investments. Fossil fuels have served us extremely well. Their energy intensity has allowed the development of technology and industry, modern agriculture, mobility and our modern lifestyle. However, by using these sources of energy we have inadvertently created conditions that will deny that lifestyle to our children and grandchildren. If we continue to use fossil fuels at current rates and emit carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, by 2100 we can expect the Earth’s average temperature to rise by 3-5°C above pre-industrial levels. This occurs because the additional carbon dioxide strengthens the natural Greenhouse Effect and warms the Earth. New research recently published in the leading scientific journal *Nature* identifies which fossil fuel reserves must not be burned to keep global temperature rise under 2°C. These include over 90% of Australia’s coal resources. Knowing this, how can we share profits from any business that is largely involved in the fossil fuel chain without accepting the ethical

responsibility to minimise the impacts of its greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide and fugitive methane) on the living planet?

The Uniting Church Synods of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria/Tasmania and Western Australia, six Anglican Dioceses in New Zealand, and the World Council of Churches have already made the decision to divest from fossil fuel companies. The Australian National University has taken a similar decision and the University of Sydney has deleted coal mining from its investment portfolio. In the financial sector, the Bendigo and Adelaide Bank will not lend to firms involved in thermal coal or coal seam gas extraction. The ANZ Bank have admitted that customers are concerned about the bank's carbon exposure and are committed to "playing its part in helping to cut emissions." We should be proud that the Australian Uniting Church Assembly has shown leadership when President Rev Prof Andrew Dutney said: "To avoid damaging climate change we must move quickly to a clean energy economy. The Uniting Church recognises that continued investment in fossil fuel industries does not support the change needed."

The Ethical Investment Working Group, in consultation with the Environment Action Group, are seeking the Uniting Church SA Presbytery and Synod's endorsement of a proposal to avoid investing in companies that cause unacceptable damage to the natural environment through their primary involvement in coal extraction and exploration.

Meanwhile, the Environment Action Group has prepared guidelines for local churches wishing to reduce their carbon footprint and work towards sustainable environmental practices. They also hope to provide information that encourages individuals to divest from fossil fuels and prudently invest in companies involved in renewable energy, environmental or humanitarian enterprises.

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