

**General Synod 2010 Motion:  
Caring for the Creation: the need to acknowledge and respond to  
population issues**

**(25.8)**

Mr President, Members of Synod, this motion is brought forward from the Public Affairs Commission, and is based on our discussion paper printed in Book 5. We have given serious thought to the causes of global and national environmental stresses, and have sought to do so in a manner consistent with our Christian faith. We understand and have experienced ourselves that it can be uncomfortable, even disturbing, for people to face population issues, but they are fundamental to the major challenges faced by humanity and other life. We bring this matter to you to encourage thoughtful and prayerful consideration and involvement, and integrated responses.

**(The scientific background)**

Increasing greenhouse gas concentrations (from burning of fossil fuels and from agriculture) superimpose a warming trend on top of the natural variability of climate. The largest scientific collaboration ever, thousands of scientists, agree that the planet is in a dangerous state. Measurements of real events are agreeing with predictions made in earlier reports. Greater numbers of extreme weather events are part of these predictions, and we're seeing them.

Expert opinion from the latest Assessment Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is that:

- Global warming of more than 2 degrees (*above pre-industrial levels*) significantly increases the chance of 'dangerous' climate change.
- To keep that increase below 2 degrees we **need to stabilize at between 350-400 parts per million carbon dioxide**; (yet even at these concentrations there is still 25-80% chance that warming will exceed 2 degrees.)
- We are **already over 385** and rising at 2 per year.
- **To reduce the risk of more than 2 degree warming, global emissions need to peak before 2015, with 50% - 85% reductions (on 2000 levels) by 2050.**

So far, international pledges total only 12-19%, and Australia has committed to just 5% . It is not looking good.

On a geological timescale, changes are now happening extremely rapidly. Life has existed for 4 billion years on earth. Modern humanity moved out of Africa less than 100,000 years ago in very small numbers. The agricultural revolution began 8,000 years ago, and the industrial revolution 200 years ago, enabling the human population to expand *extremely rapidly* all over the earth – we now number 6.8 billion, and increasing.

**But**

- The resources of the Earth are being used unsustainably
- Human consumption is causing serious environmental stress.

The fundamental problem is that global population growth is unsustainable. Through sheer numbers and consumption we are having unprecedented impact.

- Much of the Earth's photosynthetic potential is already being directly used by us; (*land now being cleared is increasingly inhospitable or home to precious and unique stocks of biodiversity*)
- The welfare and even survival of poorer people is threatened
- Major extinctions of other life forms are very likely by the end of *this* century.

Shortage of resources is now fuelling many human conflicts in the world. Combined with climate change, we have to expect that there will be much more conflict and suffering, and more refugees.

### **(What responsibility do we bear?)**

Most people in developed countries, including Australia, have benefited hugely from the resources of the Earth. Until recently we did not have compelling evidence of the problems caused by growth in people and consumption, but now we do. Our awareness comes with responsibility to do our best for the future. **The Motion refers** to statements from Lambeth about our responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all Creation.

There is a wide appreciation in Christian traditions of our need to be better stewards. The Environment Working Group of the General Synod is compiling resources including from around the Dioceses for ready access. It is within our power to change our own ways significantly to lessen our impact. **The Motion asks us to act individually and as the church.**

However, the United Nations medium projection is for 2.4 billion more people to be living on the Earth by 2050. In Australia there is concern about the projection for our population to increase from 22 to 35 million by then.

Even at present populations, we have not been able to agree on enough reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. How much bigger the challenge becomes if population increases substantially further!

### ***(Reasons for avoiding population issues – and some responses)***

Debate on population issues has begun in Australia, after a period when the topic was perceived as too sensitive. Concern has been expressed for many years from the scientific community, some of whom have indicated that the Australian population is already around the level of what can be sustained. Nevertheless, political leaders were encouraging rapid growth. This has now changed, reflecting concern in the electorate. However, recent public discussion has been focusing on infrastructure, amenity, demography and the economy. The big picture of caring for the whole Creation is largely missing. **This Motion seeks to voice it.**

Our paper on population issues discusses some reasons for reluctance to address population growth. **We all need to examine our own deepest motives, and to question those of others, because self-interest often underpins resistance to change.** Some examples, briefly:

- (1) Businesses benefit financially from population growth (more sales, more profit) and home owners benefit from higher home values - but others may have to give up hope of ever achieving home ownership.
- (2) Population growth directly provides economic growth, which is a prime goal for governments; but should population be a prime means to drive economic growth? Who are the beneficiaries once certain (and not very high) levels of personal financial security have been achieved? **The Motion asks the Government** to avoid any reliance on population increase to maintain economic growth. (*Growth is the predominant value shaping our civilisation, but it is obvious that societies aspiring to ever-increasing growth will cause progressive destruction of the environment.*) There needs to be creative work towards sustainable economic models that develop equilibrium and are characterised by community strength and wellbeing.
- (3) Some think an increased birth rate is needed to compensate for an ageing population, but the costs of adjusting are not likely to be huge. In particular there are big savings in infrastructure costs for a society that stabilises population.
- (4) In the context of unsustainable global population growth it is inconsistent to provide financial incentives specifically and primarily for increased numbers of births (**the Motion calls for a halt to this**); providing support for quality parenting and education is a better fit with the big picture of unsustainable population growth.
- (5) Some people fear being regarded as racist or xenophobic if they query immigration levels and ask for sustainable population policy, or they fear that the church will be misinterpreted. But speaking the truth in love leads on to action based on love. There is scope for us in Australia to respond more generously in humanitarian immigration and to care better for future human and other life on our fragile land (**the Motion calls for this**).
- (6) Family planning education and facilities may be sensitive for some church members. It is important to see that we are talking about **voluntary and culturally sensitive family planning**, and the context is overpopulation. **The Motion calls for** improving the welfare of people in the least developed nations, and other life in their environments, by including such support with aid for development. (*Every child should be treasured, and it is an expression of love to try to ensure that every child in the world can be treasured.*)

### **(The extent of the challenge on this issue)**

Present action will not be enough. The UN projection of 9.2 billion by 2050 **assumes** that, in the 50 least developed countries, the number of children per woman will decrease from 4.63 to 2.50 by then. The UN states that to achieve such reduction it is **essential for family planning access to expand in the poorest countries**. Without more fertility reduction the UN projects world population to reach 11.8 billion, not 9.2 billion. There is no certainty of well-managed decline from a peak, and there are serious doubts that the peak number could be fed.

*(Agricultural productivity currently depends on fertilizers based on fossil fuels, and there are severe limitations on increases in agricultural land and water for crops.)*

*(In response, three strongly linked goals - population stabilisation, environmental sustainability, and ending extreme poverty - are the essence of the Millenium Development Goals.)*

Sadly, it has been difficult to obtain support from rich countries to help poor countries speed up their demographic transition. Contributing much more to this cause would be a very effective and compassionate way for Australia to help people in poor nations, *and* their environments.

### **In Conclusion**

In the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, we need to show that we love God's creation, and to learn to trust one another in a world of limited resources, through justice and caring for our neighbour.

Out of care for the whole Creation, particularly the poorest of humanity and the life forms who cannot speak for themselves, we argue that it is not responsible to remain silent.

We need to act ourselves *and* to call on our Government to act - based on the 'big picture'. There is no time to lose.

I commend the Motion to you.

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**Motion: Caring for the Creation: The need to acknowledge and respond to population issues**

That this General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia acknowledges:

- Resolution I.8 of the Lambeth Conference 1998, which
  - reaffirms the Biblical vision of Creation according to which the divine Spirit is present in Creation and human beings have responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all Creation; and
  - recognizes that unless human beings take responsibility for caring for the earth, the consequences will be catastrophic because of: overpopulation, unsustainable levels of consumption by the rich, poor quality and shortage of water, air pollution, eroded and impoverished soil, forest destruction, and animal extinction.
- The encouragement in Resolution 14.15 of the Anglican Consultative Council in May 2009 for Provinces ‘to advocate sustainable restorative economies with national governments, the United Nations through the Anglican Observers Office, and local constituencies’.

**And requests**

(1) Australian Anglican Dioceses and individuals to:

- Grow in understanding of global and national environmental challenges, and the fundamental role of human population growth in contributing to them,
- Use resources including those identified by the General Synod’s Public Affairs Commission and Environment Working Group to assist in developing integrated views of issues and potential responses, and take action to reduce our impacts
- Contribute thoughtfully and prayerfully to public debate about how to
  - achieve justice not only for current Australians but for our descendants
  - nurture and protect all other life on this fragile land with all its beauty and diversity
  - share in a world of finite resources, showing love for our neighbours in other parts of the world.

(2) The Australian Government to:

- Recognise the fundamental role of population growth in contributing to global and national environmental challenges, and avoid any reliance on continuing population growth to maintain economic growth.
- Determine a sustainable population policy for Australia which is fair and just for future human and other life on this ecologically fragile land, and generous towards humanitarian needs
- Halt any incentive aimed specifically and primarily at increasing Australia’s population
- Contribute more generously to improving the welfare of people in the least developed nations, and other life in their environments, in particular by

including support for family planning and women's reproductive health programmes with aid for development.

(3) The reporting of the outcome of this Motion to the United Nations Anglican Observers Office.

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