

ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN THE KEY OF AN ECONOMY OF LIFE

A guide for Uniting Church in Australia councils, agencies, units, boards, committees and working groups

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended as an encouragement for faithful ethical decision-making across the life of the Uniting Church in Australia. It is based on the principles and commitments to the wellbeing of people and the planet as described in the Assembly Statement, *An Economy of Life: Reimagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World*.

Each of the following four sections starts with a short reflection and offers a series of questions designed to serve as conversation starters. The questions are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive and not all will be relevant in every situation. You may choose to rework or develop alternative and/or additional questions that are more suitable to your context. If you have responsibility for chairing meetings, you may choose a few of the most relevant questions and invite people to consider these ahead of the meeting. The questions are not designed to elicit 'right' or 'wrong' answers but rather to help us ensure that our conversations and decisions are grounded in and framed by our faith, our church and our shared understandings of what it means to live faithfully.

The first section sets this guide in the context of *An Economy of Life* and the resolutions based on the statement. It begins with a very brief reflection on the connection between our decision-making, the principles of an 'economy of life' and the nature of church as described in the Basis of Union.

The second section invites you to consider the big picture of God's mission in the world and our place in this. The questions here may seem 'big'; not the kinds of questions we usually have time to talk about in church meetings when we're making 'every day' decisions. They can, however, serve as provocations in relation to how our 'everyday' connects with our call to serve God by seeking justice and reconciliation.

The third section is the bridge between the 'big' questions of faith and life and the more easily identifiable commitments to living ethically and sustainably. It is an invitation to think about our communal discipleship and how our decisions can be an expression of our stance in the world against systems and structures that breed injustice, greed and violence.

The fourth section is probably the most obvious, inviting us to raise questions about tangible matters of sustainability, energy consumption, carbon footprint, recycling and waste and participation in ethical supply chains.

It is important to remember that we can't save the world or even a small part of the world with every decision we make. We could easily end up paralysed if we thought each and every decision we needed to make together was so significant. Many decisions that come before us as we seek to live out our mission as church in this place and time are procedural or administrative in nature. Many will be small parts of larger, more complex issues. Some decisions will have an obvious ethical dimension, others may have ethical implications that may not be immediately obvious and there will be some decisions which are, at their very heart, about how we live with integrity as a church and as Christian community.

ONE | AN ECONOMY OF LIFE AND OUR LIFE AS CHURCH

An Economy of Life speaks to a vision of love and wholeness based on the values of the reign of God: The biblical stories, sacred witnesses to the history of our relationship with God, articulate a vision for human wholeness and wellbeing grounded in the values of the reign of God: love (of God and each other, even our enemy and especially those most vulnerable), justice, peace, grace, mercy and forgiveness, hospitality, inclusion, connectedness and compassion.¹

¹ An Economy of Life p. 3

Living out the values of God's economy of life requires us to understand life and all its riches as a sacred gift from God: "as sacred gift, the riches of life must be approached with humility, regarded with reverence and respect, and valued as precious, never being taken for granted."² This is the understanding that the Uniting Church takes into the public sphere as it advocates for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. It should also be the attitude that marks our relationship with the buildings, money, people and communities for which we have responsibility.

The *Basis of Union* (par. 3) understands the church as "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" and "a pilgrim people". The church is not known through its buildings and money. It cannot be identified by its structures or even its councils. The church and the mission of the church do not belong to us – they are an expression of God's activity in the world:

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end... the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal.³

The Uniting Church in Australia is home to an wonderful variety of creative, vibrant and life-affirming ministries. These ministries have grown out of the faithful exercise of our call as a church to bring the good news of God's love to the world. They require prayerful and faithful decision-making that reflects our values as a church and our identity, history and law.

As a church, we understand that the way we approach ethical decision-making and issues of sustainability should differ significantly from what is usually understood by these terms in the corporate sector. As an organisation within a broader civil society, however, the Uniting Church does have particular responsibilities for accountability and compliance in its business and we must be vigilant to ensure that we meet these responsibilities. Ethical decision-making, therefore, also requires us to exercise good governance and management, recognising that these aspects of our life cannot be separated from the call to participate in the mission of God. For a church, good governance and management must include living out commitments to sustainable, ethical and just practices in its life and also a commitment to transparency, that is, the need to give an account of the basis and reasons for the decisions which are made.

Our decision-making, however, must not only be about meeting these requirements. There are and should be significant differences between how other organisations make decisions, and how the Church does, including its councils, agencies, boards, units and committees. Whether the decisions relate to governance, management, programs or mission, we are an expression of "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit", called to witness to God's love, grace, mercy and justice.

TWO | SERVING GOD, HUMANITY AND THE WHOLE CREATION

The Church's role in the mission of God in the world requires us to be constantly asking how we might be good news in our own world...

We are called to live out the vision of Jesus for human wholeness, an alternative understanding of what constitutes human progress – the love of God, made manifest for people in the experiences of dignity and respect, meaning and purpose in life, connection with the earth and all its creatures, health and security of person and inclusion in communities of care and participation in society.⁴

As Christians and as church, we are part of God's mission of love in the world. While most of our decision-making is specific, local and modest, it is appropriate that we remember the vision for reconciliation and justice that we have received as a gift of God through Jesus Christ.

Through our councils, agencies, communities and congregations, we seek to discern our shared understanding of:

- how we can faithfully participate in the mission of God in this place at this time;
- how we can best serve those in need, in our local places, in our society and across the world;

² An Economy of Life p. 7

³ Basis of Union, par. 3

⁴ An Economy of Life, p. 3

- and how our decisions and our actions can be a genuine expression of our belief in the God whose will is for the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation.⁵

The questions below are intended both to draw our hearts and minds back to these bigger questions and to be a reminder that even in the mundane and the administrative we are servants of Christ. Remember, it may be that only one or two of them are relevant in any particular discussion. You could also choose to specifically address some of these questions annually or every so often as it makes sense for your work.

- How are we contributing to justice and peace in the world (globally, nationally and/or locally)?
- How does this decision reflect our understanding of the earth as God's sacred creation?
- How are we demonstrating the values of the reign of God such as compassion, hospitality, community and generosity?
- How are we making a recognisable stand against injustice, greed, prejudice, oppression and violence in all or any of their forms?
- Where there is potential for strong disagreement or disharmony, have we taken steps to ensure that the decision-making process is respectful of all people and contributes positively to reconciliation within the community?
- Will others see in this decision an example of us living with integrity and authenticity, 'practicing what we preach'?

THREE | LIVING A DIFFERENT STORY

The Uniting Church in Australia believes it is called to take a prophetic stand in this world, standing with those who are marginalised and confronting the interests and the powers that perpetrate violence, injustice and oppression. As Jesus challenged the empire of Rome by exposing those who benefited from an unjust system and calling them to a different way of being in the world, so too must we understand who has a stake in maintaining the systems of injustice and violence in our world and how we ourselves might be complicit.⁶

An Economy of Life refers to how our world is being driven by a global economic system that is built on the ideas, values and principles of 'neoliberalism', including:

- individualism – the principle that it is people acting individually for their own benefit that is best for the world;
- greed (for power, money and possessions);
- materialism – the belief that money and possessions will make you happy;
- consumerism – the idea that we are more important as consumers who buy things than as people who live in relationship with each other and the planet. This is closely related to materialism.
- the commodification of life – that is, the idea that everything can be costed, bought and sold, even genetic material;
- competition (in the marketplace) – that open and free competition will lead to the best, most efficient and cheapest solutions for our needs; and
- economic growth without limit – the idea that human wellbeing depends on continual economic growth. As a country we judge our success and wellbeing by measuring things like GDP (Gross Domestic Product). GDP measures our total economic production as a nation – it is mostly about what we spend. When we spend more, GDP goes up and when we spend less, GDP goes down. It doesn't matter what we're spending our money on (like rebuilding after natural disasters). As long as we continue to spend, we are improving our wellbeing.

The Christian vision for life, however, is grounded in the values of the reign of God: generosity, compassion, co-operation, equity and justice. The Bible is full of stories about the danger of greed and the responsibility of those with wealth and power to share what they have and work for justice. The Church is called to live a story that is different from that of a market-driven, individualistic society.

The following questions are offered to encourage conversation about how Christian values, principles and concerns can influence the decisions we make and challenge habits of thinking that are counter to God's 'economy of life'.

⁵ Basis of Union, Par. 3

⁶ An Economy of Life, p. 6

- How are we upholding relational models of living and working over and against individualistic models?
- How are we working co-operatively rather than out of a competitive frame?
- How are we participating in practices that build peace?
- How are we prioritising the needs of those who are poor?
- How are we providing hospitality and refuge to the stranger and those in need?
- Have we considered any unintended consequences? Have we taken steps to mitigate any potential harm?
- How are we reducing our own environmental footprint?
- Is this investment decision ethical? Have we done all we can to ensure that our investment is not supporting destructive, dangerous, polluting or abusive industries and companies that support such destructive and abusive industries? Have we explored investment in ethical companies that contribute to a just and sustainable world?
- How does our decision support local economies?
- How does our decision support the wellbeing of 'the commons' (wilderness, forests, deserts, rivers, oceans and shared public spaces)?
- How does this decision uphold the conservation of our nation's cultural heritage (sites, languages and customs)?

FOUR | ETHICAL CONSUMPTION AND REDUCING OUR FOOTPRINT

Christians, believing that God is love, that it was out of love that God gave birth to the world, that all that is necessary for life to flourish is provided by the Creator and that God's will is for the flourishing and reconciliation of all creation, live life out of genuine hope, believing that transformation is possible. This is not a wild or shallow optimism that is satisfied to rest on the idea that all will be OK in the end, but a commitment to engage as active participants in the reconciliation of the world with God.⁷

The questions in this section relate to our consumption. An *Economy of Life* encourages us to think about how much we buy and consume, and the impact of what we choose to buy and consume on the people who make the products and on the environment.

Most questions in this sections relate to general policies and procedures which may or may not be in place, rather than any one particular decision. For various reasons (rental of office space, the work of voluntary committees with no designated 'workplace') there are often limits to what can be done in relation to the energy efficiency of the buildings we inhabit or the practices for dealing with recycling and waste. But even if this is the case for you, there will be many other areas of life where we can make a difference. Sometimes ethical consumption and installing energy efficient systems can be more expensive. This is where it can be helpful to have conversations about how to prioritise the different demands. At least in this way, when compromises are made, people understand how the decisions have been made. Again, this is not an exhaustive list of questions. They are intended to prompt careful thought and discussion and may give rise to more relevant questions for the area of ministry and service in which you are engaged.

TRAVEL

- How do we encourage cycling and walking wherever possible?
- Do we use public transport or car share services whenever we can?
- Do we make the most of our trips, for example, by setting up multiple meetings?
- Have we canvassed all possible alternatives to flying on this occasion?
- Have we coordinated the sharing of taxis for rides to and from the airport?
- If we have fleet cars, are they as fuel efficient as possible, for example, electric or hybrid?

ENERGY CONSUMPTION & WASTE

- Do we turn off lights when we can?
- Are our appliances energy efficient and are we replacing capital items with the most energy efficient models available?
- Are we purchasing low carbon footprint products when available?
- Are we minimising our use of air-conditioning whenever possible?

⁷ An Economy of Life, p. 7

- Are our computers set to 'sleep' or 'hibernate' if they are not used for 30 minutes and do we encourage each other to turn off our computers and screens at the end of the day?
- Do we turn electrical equipment off 'stand by' mode?
- Do we buy local and seasonal food?
- How can we reduce food waste at our meetings? Can we set up a system for composting?
- How can we minimise the use of plastic?
- Are we recycling paper, bottles, plastic, toner cartridges, old equipment?
- Have we set up systems to encourage minimal use of paper and are we using recycled paper?
- When maintenance and repairs are needed to properties are we taking the opportunity to retro-fit for sustainability and energy efficiency?

WATER

- How are we limiting our water use?
- Do we have low-water-use appliances and gardens?
- Do we collect rainwater where possible?
- Do we recycle water where possible?

ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

- Are we buying certified fair trade products?
- Do we avoid brands that participate in destructive or abusive practices?
- Are we consuming 'green' energy?
- Are we buying products that have a relatively long operational life?
- Are we buying and using recycled products?

Note

In 2009, the Assembly adopted the statement *An Economy of Life: Re-imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World*⁸ and a number of resolutions arising out of the principles expressed in that statement. These included:

- 09.21.02** a) to commit itself and call on members, councils and agencies of the Uniting Church to:
- (i) examine their lives as Christian disciples and communities that they may first of all serve God in the world through the love, compassion and generosity extended to all our neighbours;
 - (ii) examine their lives in order to identify where and when they behave in ways that deny human and ecological wholeness;
 - (iii) examine their lives in order to identify where and when monetary interests are placed ahead of human and ecological wellbeing;
 - (iv) identify, develop and implement alternative systems, structures and processes within the church that promote the practice of the economy of God and model a way of being in the world which promotes human wholeness, equity and ecological sustainability.

This resource has been produced by Uniting Justice Australia at the request of the Assembly Standing Committee in order to support councils, agencies, units and groups across the Uniting Church in Australia. The Assembly Standing Committee commends this resource for use across the Church and its agencies.

⁸ A copy of the statement and resolution can be found on the UnitingJustice Australia website and all citations to *An Economy of Life* refer to the document as it is reproduced here <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>