



Assembly of
Confessing Congregations
of the Uniting Church in Australia

Social Responsibility Commission

The Church's Social Responsibility

'A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church.'

(Statement to the Nation of the Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1977)

As this statement clearly says, Christians have a responsibility towards society which is fundamental to the life and mission of the Church. Therefore it is important to give careful consideration to the nature of this responsibility to ensure that it is exercised in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Along with the Statement to the Nation the Social Responsibility Commission affirms 'our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles' because a concern for the life of both church and society is a core factor in the life of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

BUILT UPON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Principles of social responsibility are not based on any form of abstract reasoning, cultural presuppositions or perceptions of need which operate in any way independently of the biblical testimony because the life of the church, including its understanding of social responsibility, is based upon Jesus Christ and 'on the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments'. Moreover, the church 'has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way'. In this way the Basis of Union provides a firm foundation for understanding the character of the social responsibility of the church being 'built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ'.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. (Basis of Union, Section 3)

The Uniting Church acknowledges that its faith and obedience are regulated by the Scriptures which are unique prophetic and apostolic testimony. 'When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witness.' This involves an understanding of the whole testimony of Scripture including the recognition of God as Creator and humanity as sinful, the *imago dei* and the male-female nature of humanity, the calling of Israel as God's people, the establishment of a covenant relationship, the fulfilment of God's purposes in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the life of the church as the Body of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the ultimate consummation of all things.

The biblical witness not only gives a rationale for engaging socially and doing justice (Micah 6:8; Luke 4:18) but also provides a foundation for understanding the nature of social relationships and the form and content of the society to which we witness (Matt. 5 - 7; Rom. 12 - 15) as well as defining our responsibility towards the whole of creation (Rom. 8:19-25). Christian social policies of the Uniting Church must be in accord with evangelical, reformed and orthodox teaching concerning social relationships as attested in Scripture. We oppose attitudes and policies which fail to respect the biblical understanding of the nature and dignity of people, whether they are general social attitudes, government policies concerning, for example, mandatory detention of asylum seekers, or policies of the church concerning sexuality. Christian principles of social responsibility and social justice are not simply versions of secular or humanist thinking but must be grounded in an understanding of God's action in Jesus Christ.

The nature of Christian social responsibility has been well spoken of in these terms:

'We call one another back to the centrality of Jesus Christ. His life of sacrificial service is the pattern for Christian discipleship. In his life and through his death Jesus modelled identification with the poor and inclusion of the other. On the cross God shows us how seriously he takes justice, reconciling both rich and poor to himself as he meets the demands of his justice. We serve by the power of the risen Lord through the Spirit as we journey with the poor, finding our hope in the subjection of all things under Christ and the final defeat of evil. We confess that all too often we have failed to live a life worthy of this gospel.'
(Micah Declaration on Integral Mission)

LIVING BETWEEN THE TIMES

The Basis of Union reminds us that 'The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring' and so lives in hope, constantly looking forward to the perfect life of the future Kingdom.

While we share with Christ in ministry we are not able to substitute our work for God's action.

- The church must not be so focussed on its present social responsibility that it either believes that the presence of the Kingdom depends solely on our action in the world, or loses sight of God's future.
- But nor should the church be so focussed on the future that we become unconcerned about the present. It is important to avoid both passivity ('we can't achieve anything') and over expectation ('we can bring in the Kingdom').

The church is to live and witness as a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Christians are to care for people and seek justice, but the hope of a new creation and a new humanity in Christ encourages Christians to see this as only one part of the church's witness to the redemptive work of Christ. Life in the Spirit and the Christian calling to serve God means sharing in the vision of the reconciliation of all things. Christians serve Christ through a ministry to the world but the church cannot bring in the Kingdom of God, create a perfect society or replace the role of the state. We look forward to the consummation of all things 'which Christ will bring'.

Unfortunately, this understanding of Christian social responsibility has been challenged by the Enlightenment view that truth concerning the human condition is to be found in the capacity of human reason alone, a view which eliminates God's ultimate purposes from the understanding of the nature and place of humanity in the world. Through the humanity of God's Son our humanity is reconstituted according to its created purpose in such a manner that he becomes

the medium by which God relates to humanity. This lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of human freedom and purpose. Any consideration of the meaning of terms such as 'social justice' or 'social responsibility' is vacuous unless they are understood in the context of the community brought into existence by God's creating and reconciling grace in Israel fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL

This community which is brought into being by the call of God on the basis of the grace shown in Jesus Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit is called to respond in faith in its own life and in relationship to the world. The church is *to be* a fellowship of reconciliation, engaging in prayer and worship and confessing Jesus as Lord over its own life. The church also has a task to do for it confesses 'Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity' and therefore the church seeks to be 'an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself'.

The church's social responsibility is thus an integral part of its response to Christ who gave himself to the world to create 'a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:7-14). This ministry of the church is part of the reconciliation of all things in Christ and closely related to the evangelical call 'that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord'. It is not so much the case that the gospel 'has social implications' as much as the gospel has intrinsically a dimension of social responsibility. Any understanding of the social responsibility of the church which neglects the evangelistic call for all to 'acknowledge Jesus as Lord' has unhelpfully divided the gospel. 'Faith' and 'works' are intimately connected (James 2:14-17) and good works and sound doctrine go together (Titus 2:9-10).

Unfortunately, the Gospel ('the good news' or 'the evangel') of the Lord Jesus Christ has commonly been divided into 'evangelism'

(often connected with the language of ‘conversion’ and ‘justification’) and ‘social action’ (often using the language of ‘transformation’ and ‘justice’). Their relationship has been understood variously with some stressing evangelism (either asserting that ‘evangelism’ is the only real responsibility of the church, or that it has a logical priority with social action being an implication of conversion). Others have acted as though ‘social justice’ is either the only real responsibility of the church with ‘evangelism’ as unnecessary (or perhaps as the primary responsibility, with ‘evangelism’ as secondary or a mere possibility).

Others have sought the better route of relating these two dimensions in ‘partnership’ (*Lausanne Paper on Evangelism and Social Responsibility*) or as ‘integrated’ (*Micah Declaration on Integral Mission*) aspects of the one gospel. This is very appropriate as the concept of ‘righteousness’ (or ‘justification’) is connected both to being justified (or ‘being made righteous’ in terms of evangelism and conversion – Rom. 3:26; 5:1) and to acting justly (as in ‘doing justice’ and being engaged in acts of social responsibility – Rom. 6:13,22; 2 Cor. 3:9). In short, the church’s gospel ministry of ‘evangelism’ and ‘social responsibility’ is a single ministry. These two dimensions cannot exist independently of each other. Although it may be possible to begin with one rather than the other, and although they may temporarily exist separately, they are fundamentally connected.

The proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ has social consequences and social action has evangelistic implications. They are part of the one Gospel life of the church.

‘Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear

witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.’ (Micah Declaration on Integral Mission)

The church has a distinctive gospel ministry and it is important that the church’s activity does not just become another form of social work, indistinguishable from that of other organisations or government departments. The church’s social responsibility includes, but extends beyond, physical needs and relates to people’s full humanity as spiritual beings made in the image of God and called to be reconciled to Christ. The very appropriate desire to avoid what is referred to negatively as ‘proselytism’ (the imposition of the gospel) has implications for the way the church ministers to people, but it cannot mean that evangelism must be left aside. It is always the responsibility of the church to witness to Jesus Christ.

HOLINESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The church’s ministry of social responsibility is one dimension of Christian holiness. While holiness is often related to the life of the individual, scriptural holiness is more than personal. Individual attitudes and actions are closely related to social relationships and responsibilities. The Gospel calls for the transformation of individuals and society. There is no holiness but ‘social holiness’. Christian virtues, including the ‘fruit of the spirit’ (Gal. 5:22-23), are often understood as relating to individuals, but grace, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so forth, have great application at a social level as well. Consequently a comprehensive Christian social responsibility not

only involves critical or 'negative' or 'prophetic' statements (although a 'negative' assessment can in fact be an essential part of a very positive approach) but also points towards and positively demonstrates a life-affirming and Spirit-filled way of life. The removal of war, injustice and inequality is an essential part of our social responsibility, but their absence alone is not the same as having peace, justice or equality in the fuller, biblical sense which involves the presence of God and the life and values of the Kingdom.

In critiquing social attitudes, behaviours and policies which are contrary to the Gospel, and in advocating and supporting those values and actions which are consistent with it, there is no intention to impose on society, compel the adoption of all Christian values or seek church control of social or governmental offices. Nonetheless, the church offers the Gospel and its values to society, promotes them and does all it can in an endeavour to see the Gospel lived out in every way, and to bring glory to God.

In doing this there are four dimensions of life and community which continually need to be drawn together.

First, there is the individual dimension of each person's relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit: hearts receive God's love (Rom. 5:5), lives are transformed (Rom. 12:2) and the Spirit guides (Gal. 5:25). Without this relationship with God in Christ all attempts at developing a Christian social responsibility are well-meaning but ultimately futile.

Secondly, an authentic Christian social responsibility will involve 'works of mercy', that is, acts of practical care for individuals and families which follow the example of Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 25:31-45; Acts 6:1-7). 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15).

Thirdly, Christian social responsibility not only works with specific situations as they arise, it also aims at dealing with the social, structural causes of such problems. Removing the causes of human need means seeking justice in social, political and economic arenas. This may be by a direct challenge to an unjust policy or law or, as the apostle Paul did in his appeal to Philemon concerning his slave Onesimus, by an indirect call to live by Christian principles (Philemon 4-16).

Finally, there is a need to examine the ideological underpinnings which produce a society's structures, actions and attitudes. Paul does this for example in his critique of Colossian society (eg Col. 2:6-23). This necessarily involves the church in a thorough process of self-examination because cultural influences and principles which are inimical to the Gospel can be absorbed into the thinking of the church. For example, in recent times good words and concepts such as diversity, discrimination, compassion, inclusivity and tolerance have been changed in meaning and emphasis in such a way as to undermine the church's understanding of social responsibility. Engaging at all four of these levels is by no means easy, but it is essential.

CONCLUSION

As Christians we are to respond to the call of the Lord Jesus Christ by living appropriately and acting responsibly in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God. While the needs of the world provide good reason for Christian action the fundamental motivation comes from the Lord Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our life and faith. He is the one who strengthens us and who enables our action, and it is he who directs and guides our belief and behaviour. In exercising that responsibility to society which is fundamental to the mission of the church it is essential that, as far as possible, we work together in unity with Christians in other denominations and organisations, and also that we avoid those divisions which can separate the various aspects of the Gospel and integrate word and deed. We remember the words of the

Lord Jesus, 'You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' (Matthew 5:14-16). However, we cannot assume that everything depends on the action of the church in the world. Christians cannot create a perfect society or bring in the Kingdom of God. The church thus exercises its social responsibility by witnessing to the redemptive work of Christ and looking forward to the consummation of all things in him.



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