

Christian Social Services Caring for People and Caring for Earth: Ecology for Climate Justice



New Zealand Council Of
Christian Social Services

How can Christian Social Services can contribute as citizens of Earth and be involved with climate change?

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Summary | whakarāpopototanga

Here we open discussion on bringing climate change awareness and advocacy more consciously into the work and practises of Christian social service organisations. Climate change brings a shift from a person-centred world view to a person-in-ecology view – an understanding which is gaining rapid acceptance in social work practise.

Becoming persons in ecology recognises that human problems, needs and strengths are a complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, political and environmental forces. Environmentally - conscious social work promotes the wellbeing of earth and the ecosystems of the planet and actively supports and understanding of the world as a woven universe. We are reminded that all forms of life are inter-related and human wellbeing is intrinsically part of environmental wellbeing.



Snail's pace and melting ice

- Bringing social sectors into climate change and advocacy for emission reductions invites us into a whole of society approach. This is a central theme of the Climate Change Commission 'Transitioning to a low emissions and climate resilient future' and the 2021 Glasgow Pact. Climate resilience means change from person in social context to person in ecological context, corresponding to the tikanga of te taiao.
- Ensuring Māori community and Māori authority's involvement in determining transitions to a climate resilient economy in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Support for Just Transitions as part of an overall climate justice strategy.
- Speed up action for housing affordability, both home ownership and rental housing, with building to support low emissions housing

- Potential detrimental impacts on poverty of carbon pricing – such as costs of gas

Whakataki | Introduction

Climate change is upon us but we don't see its immediacy. Yet COVID19 is upon us and we see its immediacy and most willingly comply with the dramatic shutting down of everyday life to combat it.

However the upheavals involved in addressing the climate crisis are greater still, and involve very far-reaching changes that governments have been reluctant to impose on restive constituencies. The necessary changes do in fact mean a complete alteration in our way of life, yet governments and influencers have not properly explained the nature of these changes, preferring instead to assure populations with statements such as “nothing is going to fundamentally change.”

The climate breakdown is often viewed as a slowly unfolding crisis, with the timespan for commensurate response pushed ever out into the future, with timeframes for taking action before disaster becomes inevitable seemingly being extended indefinitely. Yet the disaster is actually upon us now. There is a tendency to regard climate breakdown as a siloed issue, that can be dealt with once poverty and urgent social pressures are attended to. In fact it is all a part of the same crisis, that rather than being compartmentalized must be addressed as the crisis of our relationship with the Earth that sustains us. Climate justice is an integral component of social justice.

The response to the threats posed by climate change have so far not included a sufficient health or political response, yet we are on a sure pathway to unravelling the fabric of life as we know it. Human societies and the air, lands and waterways on which we depend are being irretrievably damaged.

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How should we bring the longer view of climate change into focus when we are battling poverty and trying to meet deepening social needs? Social services are at the hard edge of COVID, not being recognized as a health provider, yet having to support people under even more strained conditions than previously. Just now the expected ballooning out of Omicron will be make us even more pre-occupied with responding to immediate needs. Yet inequity worsening in health provision and statistics because of social inequities. People renting and in overcrowded housing (33% Māori, 41% Pacific) can't self-isolate, digital exclusion is rife for children who have to share computers at home and for those relying on library computers to access benefit information and housing waiting lists. Renters are now the most disadvantaged group in Aotearoa NZ. (Bernard Hickey, Jan 2022). Inequity is always cited in climate change response strategies because the poor are least able to adapt and respond to rapid change. The cost of living in New Zealand is becoming a serious concern for many as basic costs such as petrol, food, housing and home energy soar beyond the ability of many to afford it.

This year Parliament will approve an emissions reduction plan. The Climate Change Commission paper on planning a low emissions economy recognises in 'Transitioning to a low emissions and climate resilient future' the imperative of cross-sectoral emissions reductions:

There is no part of Aotearoa, no business, no community, no farm, no family, whose future will not be shaped in some way by the decisions we all take about what goes in the plan. (Ministry for Environment, Climate Change Commission. October 2021)



School Strikes for the Climate 2019

Justice – earth and society are one

The dedication of people involved in the large work of social services means enabling people to face the pressures of poverty and life's mischances and give the tools for change. Social services are a people-oriented world bringing skills to the encounter with people operating on low capability, who may be traumatised by abuse, not able to pay for rent or food and stressed by limited options. Social services offer support for healing, recovery and access to resources that can bring change.

This a socially oriented world with Christian values of options for the poor, human dignity and human rights, equality, and love of our 'neighbour' – values of consideration of others. Many social services focus on community development to bring those needing services into supportive relationships in their communities and enable their participation. Social justice brings into play the structures that cause and perpetuate poverty and trauma, understanding they are not caused by individual mistakes or misfortune, but by structures of power. Corporate rules allow a few to accumulate wealth because they employ people on low wages and politics often favour those able to exert influence. Colonization and racism are structures of power and injustice.

As we look at the profiles of poverty and health and education in social services there are the twin aspects of the ethnicity of those who are employed in social service provision and the disproportion of Māori as clients. Te Tiriti o Waitangi gives us a structural reference for reshaping services and reversing racism that has seen Pakeha / tauwi dominate social service delivery. Our social services must recognise and respond to the increasingly loud calls for Māori Authorities as an expression of rangatiratanga, with services by Māori for Māori.

Social justice therefore means taking part in the world of politics and policy and, at times protest. Social services are in a unique position of reporting the lived experience of hardship and trauma to government, to influence decisions about social issues.

The effects of climate change will disproportionately effect those who are already facing structural oppression or who are more vulnerable. As two recent commentators noted, "the transition to net

zero will not be sustainable if it worsens social inequalities.” It is already apparent that rising inequality is causing significant unrest and political turbulence around the world. New Zealand is not immune. The strains of an adjustment to a lower-carbon world will only add further to the upheaval if the transition is unjust. Social service agencies have a role to play in advocating for a just transition and to be part of the safety net.

Social Services and Climate Justice

The social justice orientation of social services offers a pivot point towards bringing climate change into the purview of social services – in particular climate justice lends itself to the structural orientation that is needed for climate change thinking. As we know climate change is not so simple. It brings us into a change in world view and a change from traditional Western theology that has allowed us to take the exploitation of life supporting air, water, trees, soils for granted. Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si* brought the beautiful statement of the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor as the same cry for love and justice. (*Laudato Si*)

ethics is well understood by theologians as anchored in the enduring call question of faith ‘am I my brother and sister’s keeper? *Laudato Si* addresses Earth and all creatures as our sisters and brothers:

[O]ur common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her (*Laudato Si* para. 1 and 2)



For Aotearoa, in the Pacific region climate justice includes responsibilities to support island Pacific Island nations by contributing to the global effort to hold climate heating to 1.5 degrees by reducing our emissions, and by financial contributions. Climate justice requires policies that are beneficial to low income and vulnerable communities in such a way as to provide for inter-generational equity to face the impact of climate change on future generations. Climate justice refers to our responsibility to safeguard the life-supporting access to safe water, food and shelter, crucial to sustaining livelihoods and quality of life.

The questions then come down to how can we bring climate change thinking into our services, and what can we practically do? How can social services respond? We are taking two pathways in this discussion, one to look at world view and our faith as climate change requires a big picture dimension, and then we look at some very practical options as smaller scale such as decisions on procurement and food, and larger scale such is in housing developments – which are significant for climate change and for community enhancing values.

Our lives depend on Air and Water, Our Incomes need to depend on Non-polluting work

As we grapple with climate change we can start with recognising it is about pollution and waste. Our fossil fuel driven industrial economy is releasing unprecedented amounts of carbon dioxide and methane (and other toxic gases) into the atmosphere at such a rate that they are forming a blanket around the earth that is locking in the heat.

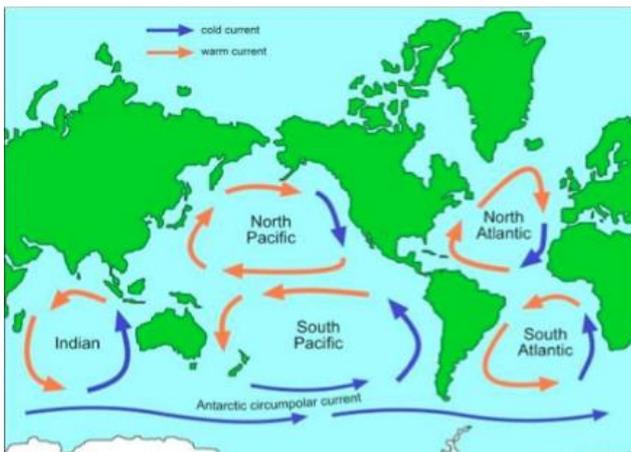
Generation Zero – launch of Zero Carbon Act.

Carbon dioxide accumulates in the atmosphere for thousands of years and this is why what we are doing now will affect the Earth systems for many generations to come. This is why school and youth activists are angry.

It was young people, Generation Zero who led the way and gave us the Zero Carbon Act.



The oceans and the water systems are a big part of this story. Heat and pollution are changing rain and weather patterns. In fact we are not yet realizing the full impacts of warming because the oceans are absorbing about 80% of carbon dioxide.



The ocean has a complex circulation system called the Global Ocean Conveyor. It moves water, heat, salt and nutrients around the world. Surface currents in the top 400 metres are driven mainly by wind. Deeper currents are driven by changes in water density. Both types of currents work with the atmosphere to help shape the Earth's climate.

Melting land ice and increased rainfall - as consequences of climate change - have the potential to disrupt the oceans' chemical and physical properties, which will impact this complex circulation system.

But this is causing oceans to become heated and acidic, resulting in the disturbance of the whole marine ecosystem including causing polar ice to melt and hence the oceans to rise. The food chain for fish is changing – fish in our waters may relocate and others may arrive here. Two Kingfish were caught at the mouth of the Otaki river this summer – they are deep sea fish!

In Aotearoa New Zealand our cars and transport and our agriculture are the biggest contributors to climate pollution. Emissions from transport are obvious. Fifty percent of our emissions come from methane from cows – too many of them.



We have parallel problems with highly polluted waterways – poisoning them through the use of chemical fertilizers for intensified agriculture and draining them of life supporting capacity by taking their waters for irrigation. So even if climate change seems remote, we can see the immediacy of pollution – perhaps by going to your local river and seeing if you can swim in it or drink the water.

While there are everyday changes we can make as individuals and as organisations, climate change does ask of us a shift from partitioning social and environmental thinking. This is a world view we have inherited from Christian theology and western traditions. A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Te Ao Māori sees the world as a woven universe and leads into the inter-relatedness of the natural and social world.

Te Ao Māori

Te Taiao is often interpreted as ‘environment’ but it is much more than that. Te Taiao reflects the Maori world view that everything in the natural environment is related for all things descend from the union of Rangi and Papa, or for scientists, the union of earthly and atmospheric phenomena. This understanding is the source of whakapapa.

The ‘Taiao’ encompasses all attributes of the environment that are experienced and valued by people and other living things. Just as whakapapa of atua includes Tūmatauenga (atua of humans) and Rongomātane (atua of cultivated foods), the Taiao includes social and economic phenomena and attributes.

Adopting the Taiao view therefore means that all parts of the environment must be respected, and the social values that go with that respect, so that the focus is not on the bottom lines of how much degradation can be tolerated, but on the best outcome that can be achieved in looking at developmental options.

Recognition of the different orientation of Te Ao Māori has important implications for social justice and the policy aspect of social services.

As an example of policy advice NZCCSS recently submitted to the HUD Consultation on Long Term planning for housing for an aging population. In our submission we distinguished between the trajectory of general population aging and that for Māori in the context of whanau, and for Pacific Peoples. This leads to different options for housing in these populations. In brief, for all populations

we identified provisions for the increasing numbers of aging people facing retirement without owning a home, and reliant on rentals. National Superannuation does not provide sufficient income for rental costs nor mortgage payments.

There is a need across all groups to facilitate home ownership for low-income people so that security of housing is retained throughout old age as long as an older person is capable of independence or co-accommodation arrangements. These include rent-to-buy and leasing. Tauwiwi, Pākehā needs may be in affordable housing such as reactivating provision of pensioner housing, Abbeyfield style shared living, retirement villages.

Then specific whānau requirements need to support provision of more collective options. An issue for long-term planning for aging Māori is to collect data relevant to whānau rangatiratanga, recognizing that information about whānau is nested within Te Ao Māori and tikanga values.

The key to a Te Tiriti framework for climate justice is to ensure Māori community and Māori authorities involvement in determination for transitions to a climate resilient economy.

Climate Justice and Just Transitions

Just Transition refers to an inclusive, fair and equitable emissions reduction planning that involves business, industry, NGO's, Unions and working people's representatives in co-design of plans. Just Transitions require support for workers in high emissions sectors to retrain for roles in a zero-emissions economy.

Policies for Just Transitions need to take account of the historic injustices and barriers to full participation of hapū, Iwi, Māori in pathways to lowering emissions.

Just Transition policies require social support for changes in employment, retraining and income. The Key points from the NZ Council of Trade Unions for Just Transitions are for a co-ordinated, systemic approach to changing employment for working people and communities. (Wagstaff and Huggard 2017).

The Climate Change Commission has already recognised the importance of education in a just transition. They note (2021 advice to government, p. 342): "the education system will be critical for setting workers up with the skills needed to deliver a thriving, low emissions Aotearoa....we heard that the cost to the country could be significant if the education system is not agile enough to continually adjust and evolve as skill needs change... education and training providers will need to be nimble in order to set New Zealanders up with transferrable skills, and the ability to adapt, upskill and learn as the way we work evolves." (Ministry for Environment October 2021)

As Ora Taiao has noted, taking action on climate change could lead to significant health benefits for New Zealanders. Walking and cycling more, eating less meat and warmer and drier homes, will benefit those in deprivation especially. There are opportunities for gains alongside the risks of rising inequality. Social services can contribute to ensuring that warmer home standards, for instance, benefit everyone. Working on the land (by growing fruit and vegetables) has proven mental health benefits. This is worthy of encouragement by those working in the area of mental wellness.

What we Produce, buy and pay for

What we buy and use, and how we produce our food, furniture, technology, and energy all have effects on land, rivers, oceans and atmosphere. We buy goods produced with toxins and chemicals; we use plastics which are by-products of fossil fuels and are environmentally destructive; we buy food produced with chemical fertilisers; and use paper made from non-renewable forests. Some products involve more greenhouse gases than others.

There is an opportunity for us all in re-orienting our spirituality, education and economy towards becoming more attuned to Earth dynamics. It can mean attentiveness in walking, breathing, observing, and listening to the Earth that sustains us with gratefulness and a sense of love for the earth. It includes our personal buying choices and their impact on the Earth.

Sustainable consumption and production require taking account of the renewability of resources. Changing our patterns of buying food and the many items we need, involves giving attention to energy use, how far goods travel, how they are made, and what materials are used. The ideal for buying is asking what is good for the Earth, healthy for our bodies, and supportive of decent working conditions for those producing the goods. This applies both to ourselves as individuals and to the churches as an organisation.

Social Services and Building

Christian Social Services are involved in building houses – here is a huge opportunity for low emissions building and climate change. Emissions associated with the building sectors come in three categories:

- Energy embodied in buildings
- Energy consumed during the use of the building, and waste generated in construction
- Emissions of non-carbon dioxide gases (e.g., from refrigeration, air conditioning, and insulation)¹

Building construction uses large amounts of steel, cement, glass, and so on. Opportunities for reducing the amount of energy associated with building include using local materials and minimizing land clearance.

Designing and operating buildings in the most energy-efficient manner creates most of the potential for reducing carbon emissions, or mitigation. Mitigation means reducing the sources or enhancing the sinks of greenhouse gases. Many parts of the world have demonstrated positive changes such as reducing heating and lighting loads; using active solar energy and other environmental heat sources; increasing the efficiency of appliances, heating and cooling equipment, and ventilation; and, applying a systems approach to building design. Such an overall view includes changing behavior as a social service community by looking at overall use of materials, food, energy use including short and long term costs (See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports for detail. Eg A. Reisinger et al. 2014)

Social Services and Purchasing

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We can look at what our organisation is buying and see how it impacts on climate change. Many of these will be familiar – hopefully they serve as a refresh for decisions about Social Services purchasing that are beneficial for reducing pollution, waste and ultimately reducing greenhouse gases.

€ Stationery and office equipment

- Kitchen goods – tea, coffee, cleaning products
- Purchases associated with hospitality – food and drink, plates and cups

We can check:

- Local sourcing (minimize energy used in transporting goods from overseas)
- Use of plastics and non-renewables
- Items produced with chemical fertilizers, palm oil
- Energy use and support for renewable energy

Issues:

There is a lot of learning and many challenges to include climate in the ethos and operations of social services.

Working with climate invites us into considerations that include financial, social, environmental aspects in an overall wellbeing sense. It means expanding holistic wellbeing into Earth-respectful wellbeing. In practical terms it means weighing comparative costs between sustainable and polluting products. It gives the option of accessing nourishing healthy, locally produced food where possible, rather than imported food.

Almost every decision on running an organization brings our interdependence to the fore, and invites thinking and practice as part of a woven universe.



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