In recent years environmental issues have become a much-discussed topic in the community at large as well as in the media and the political arena. There is of course good reason for this to be so: enviro-sceptics still exist. Nevertheless, there is arguably a broad consensus that the Earth is in trouble, and that something needs to be done, and done now. But the 2009 climate conference in Copenhagen demonstrated how difficult it is for politicians to find sustainable ways forward into the future. The Church too has not found it an easy matter to deal with, but while a start has been made, much more needs to be done.

Recent decades have produced a very large volume of literature on eco-theology and its implications. That has been a great step forward, but often enough the problem has been that it has remained largely in the area of generalities, and has not been expressed in terms of specific situations and jurisdictions. Over the years the Uniting Church has passed a number of resolutions and issued documents on this subject, beginning with the 1st Assembly in 1977; and we are not alone in that. But is it enough? The aim of this paper is to explore what it might mean for the Uniting Church, as part of a larger family of churches, to recognise eco-mission, the other side of eco-theology, as part of the mainstream of what the Church is about, and to explore a number of implications in terms of policies and structures to enable that outcome.
Mainstreaming Eco Mission: Uniting Around a Global Issue - Rev Dr Clive Ayre

What is critical is to see that ecology is inevitably a part of both theology and mission, and that there is an absolute link between eco-theology, eco-mission, and eco-praxis.

Definition and Basis of Eco Mission

Christian mission is deeply rooted in theology, and practical theology in particular. Ogletree offers what I believe is a helpful comment: "Theology is practical in the sense that it concerns, in all of its expressions, the most basic issues of human existence". It does have its theoretical side, he argues, in which we need to stand back from a particular experience, in this case the environmental crisis, in order to understand more clearly what is happening around us. But that is not an end in itself. Forrester's observation is also compelling. Whilst emphasising that practical theology is theology, he asserts that we cannot talk about God or talk to God while setting aside, even temporarily, the ethical or normative question: "What is God calling us to do?"

However, the difficulty of establishing an adequate and agreed definition of mission is reflected in the literature. As David Bosch cautioned, mission is ultimately undefinable and we should never take it upon ourselves to "delineate mission too sharply and too self-confidently". However, in moving towards a definition it must be said that the mission of the Church flows out of the nature and theology of the Church. It is of course set in the context of the environmental crisis and the need to care for creation, but it begins with eco-theology as the inevitable foundation for any approach to the theology and praxis of eco-mission. Langmead expressed the link quite succinctly, "Ecotheology implicitly contains an ecomissiology, just as all theologies give direction for understandings of mission that flow from them". What is critical is to see that ecology is inevitably a part of both theology and mission, and that there is an absolute link between eco-theology, eco-mission, and eco-praxis.

As Shenk and others have argued, it is clear that "God's redemptive mission" is rooted in the centrality of the reign of God; the good news of the gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God, and “the animating centre of mission and of theology". Thus, “mission is the means by which God's reign is being realized in the world". It is at this point that eco-mission becomes not only possible, but also indeed inevitable.

Kirk also picks up the theme of the kingdom of God, and suggests that it is only in such a context that the missio Dei can be understood. Thus, for Kirk mission becomes the defining reality of the Church; “the Church … intentionally bears witness to the meaning and relevance of the kingdom, while not itself being identical with that kingdom". The ecological implications of such a position are not lost on Kirk. A wider and deeper vision of mission becomes apparent in the affirmation that the Church is called to announce the reign of God, aiming for wholeness, inclusion, and service rather than domination.
In short, eco-mission is simply an approach that includes ecological and environmental factors, or God’s creation, as an integral part of Christian mission. As such it is important to affirm that it is not based on pragmatism, although that is not without merit, but rather connects with some fundamental elements of theology, beginning with a theology of creation.

Creation represents an affirmation about the world and us. In all its finitude and limitation, creation is good, even though Duchrow and Liedke\(^{10}\) have a point when they argue that the initial reference now should rather be the suffering of creation. Creation, as distinct from creationism, represents an affirmation about the world and us. In all its finitude and limitation, creation is good. This is in sharp contrast with a Neoplatonic dualism that still tends to prevail in some circles; this is the belief that spirit is good and matter is evil, that “earth” equates with “dirty” and from “the world” we move to “the flesh and the devil!” It introduces a broader and deeper dimension to our understanding, and includes not only what we understand as ecology or nature, but also the universe itself. The key is the faith or belief that God created matter and is the source of life, and this is God’s world; as Migliore put it, “God alone is the source of all that exists”\(^{11}\).

The grace of God too is bound to emerge as a crucial insight if we are to understand God, ourselves, and our place on Earth. Jenkins’ phrase is “ecologies of grace”\(^{12}\), and it demonstrates how grace is an undergirding element in the whole discussion of the way faith relates to the Earth. James Nash makes a useful contribution to the debate when he declares: “The logic of the doctrine of creation does not permit a nature-grace dichotomy”.

Grace is not only the forgiveness of sins but the ‘givenness’ of life, both redemption and creation – ‘a double gratuity’. The whole of nature – the biophysical universe – is not the antithesis of grace, but rather an expression of grace…\(^{13}\).

Perhaps more than anyone else in his time, Sittler viewed the whole of creation as an expression of grace, and I can do little more than touch on his work here. But he asks, “Is it again possible to fashion a theology catholic enough to affirm redemption’s force enfolding nature, as we have affirmed redemption’s force enfolding history?”\(^{14}\) He goes on to refer to the maturing of the Enlightenment’s heritage, and declares:

\[\text{The cleavage between grace and nature is complete. Man’s identity has been shrunk to the dimensions of privatude within social determinism. The doctrine of creation has been made a devout datum of time past. The mathematization of meaning in technology and its reduction to operational terms in philosophy has left no mental space wherein to declare that nature, as well as history, is the theatre of grace and the scope of redemption.}^{15}\]
It is clear that both theologically and sociologically the church is a discreet entity, yet its life is lived within the wider environs of the earth itself. The various biblical metaphors of the Church when taken together suggest the transformation of the Church as part of the world.

But eco-mission is also rooted in the nature of the Church itself. It is clear that both theologically and sociologically the church is a discreet entity, yet its life is lived within the wider environs of the earth itself. The various biblical metaphors of the Church when taken together suggest the transformation of the Church as part of the world. In the conclusion of his significant paper on this theme, Conradie reflects helpfully on the church as part of the wider household of God, and suggests, after Bonhoeffer, that the church may be viewed as one room within the house.

Within this (upper) room the church community may celebrate its adoption as children (not merely as resident aliens) within the household. It acknowledges that Jesus is the door through which one may enter this room and through whom the homeless may experience both a refuge and abundant life (John 10:9). Thus, Conradie continues, "the church offers a particular vision of the very architecture, building and ownership of the house", and is "that place within the house where one can find traces that bear witness to the presence of the owner and keeper of the house". In a similar vein Bosch argues that while the church is part of the human community, it nevertheless "has to remain identifiably different from the world, else it will cease to be able to minister to it". The various images and metaphors of the Church point towards that distinctive identity.

Eco Mission and UC Polity

The Uniting Church of course acknowledges its place in the global ecumenical family of churches, and consequently any approach to eco-mission must begin at that level.

Statements have been made and actions determined at the broadest level of national and international affairs, where oikoumene is understood in terms of its original meaning of ‘the whole inhabited earth’, and while these may not impact greatly on actions at a local level, they do form an essential context in which further action is possible. In that regard, it is worthy of note that commitment to an ecological mission agenda covers a wide spectrum of what might be called the religious community. Several examples of significant agreement could be cited.

The World Council of Churches has had a significant role through its unit, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and has contributed to the debate through a range of books and publications. But one example may serve to highlight both the possibilities and limitations of action at this level. The WCC participated in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and later in that year published Redeeming the Creation. Clearly the book contains useful reflections on the Summit and other valuable insights, including a Letter to the Churches.
Council delegates wrote, as they said, “with a sense of urgency”. Their words are stark: “The earth is in peril. Our only home is in plain jeopardy. We are at the precipice of self-destruction. For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems of the planet are being destroyed by human actions”. Later in the letter they stated, “You will understand why our hearts are heavy and why it is extremely urgent that we as churches make strong and permanent spiritual, moral and material commitments to the emergence of new models of society, based in deepest gratitude to God for the gift of life and in respect for the whole of God’s creation”.

A similar call to action from within the same ecumenical family came from the United States, where the National Council of Churches convened a conference in 2005. This resulted in an Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States, entitled God’s Earth is Sacred. Again, it is a considered statement, and contains crucial insights relating to ecological theology and mission. The “Call to Action” is based on a strong foundation that I would contend has implications for eco-mission in and through the Church generally. It begins with the confession that for too long Christians have pushed the care of the Earth to the periphery of their agenda.

It continues:

This is not a competing ‘program alternative’, one ‘issue’ among many. In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that the central moral imperative of our time is care for Earth as God’s creation…. We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be ‘church’ while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as God’s creation.

An “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” was formulated in 1994 by the Evangelical Environmental Network in the United States, and while it reflects a different theological orientation, its content is broadly similar to other such statements. This Declaration acknowledges the degradation of creation, and then set out four spiritual responses involving both attitudes and actions. “The earthly result of human sin,” it declares, “has been a perverted stewardship, a patchwork of garden and wasteland in which the waste is increasing….” The call to action includes the following: “We call upon Christians to listen to and work with all those who are concerned about the healing of creation, with an eagerness both to learn from them and also to share with them our conviction that the God whom all people sense in creation (Acts 17:27) is known fully only in the Word made flesh in Christ the living God who made and sustains all things.”
Until recent years the natural environment has largely been taken for granted, along with anthropocentric theological assumptions. This has meant that it has not occurred to many missiologists that the Earth might be included in the mission of Christ.

An approach to ecological mission was inherent in the very foundation of the Uniting Church in 1977. The Basis of Union includes the following statement:

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 (italics mine). The Church's call is to serve that end.

In differing degrees and ways successive Assemblies and Synods have set out to reaffirm and apply that fundamental commitment both through publications as well as a range of general and specific resolutions. "For the Sake of the Planet..." was published by the Assembly in 2004 and set out to state the case for creation care. Complementary perspectives were picked up in the "Economy of Life", including my own "Eco-nomy of Life from the Perspective of Earth". Thus, in the official understanding of the Uniting Church, creation care is caught up strongly in the social justice agenda and becomes part of the moral and political advocacy mission of the Church.

There can be little doubt that in both ecumenical and denominational terms, creation care is affirmed in principle and policy; the problem has been that at least until recently it has tended to be missing in action, although that is starting to change. The Church often seems to find it difficult to convert policy into effective action, but this is a gap that is almost universal across the whole Christian Church.

There are various reasons for this, and these will be picked up in the next section. But in general terms it is fair to say that until recent years the natural environment has largely been taken for granted, along with anthropocentric theological assumptions. This has meant that it has not occurred to many missiologists that the Earth might be included in the mission of Christ. Anecdotal evidence that studies in eco-theology and eco-mission have not always played a significant part in theological education is consistent with that approach.

Other difficulties have been of a more practical nature, such as the lack of resource people and a sense of isolation that is easy to understand in this “wide brown land” with its vast distances. But one basic issue has been the problem of where to locate eco-mission in structural terms. How do we locate eco-mission in the structure of the Church without implying that in practical terms it is an optional extra, and not part of our core business?
Mainstreaming Eco Mission: Uniting Around a Global Issue - *Rev Dr Clive Ayre*

The situation in British Methodism may have something to say to us in Australia. The Methodist Church is relatively active environmentally. It claims that in the year 2000 it became the first denomination to produce an Environmental Policy, a document that covered theology briefly and practical implications more extensively. As the Church’s principal environmental advocate, Hucklesby indicated that the Methodist Church was the first to switch its headquarters to green electricity, and together with the United Reformed Church was the primary source of funding for EcoCongregation, a significant ecumenical group committed to the encouragement of eco-mission at the local level.

All that is fine so far as it goes, but there is a danger that at a hierarchical level, organisational arrangements could lead to a separation of eco-mission and what may be considered more “mainstream” mission. When I set out to visit the UK in 2007 I hoped to interview the person responsible for mission education in the Methodist Church but was directed instead to the International Affairs Consultant, namely Steve Hucklesby, who stated that “the issue of the environment and climate change crosses the remits of at least 4 coordinating secretaries, so it’s not just a question of the mission department or social affairs”.

When the Rev Bob Fyffe set out to update the structures of the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland he took a similar approach. The environment became part of the remit of all the other committees rather than a discreet group in its own right. There is certainly something to be said for that, but it is not without its dangers. The adage that everybody’s business is nobody’s business could easily apply.

The question of where eco-mission fits within the structure of the Church in Australia has long been a vexed issue. The tendency in our tradition has been to link the environment with Social Justice; and there is of course a clear and legitimate link in that in many ways social- and eco-justice are part of the same issue. However, that is not the whole story. In Queensland several years ago environmental matters came under the Social Justice Advocate, which meant that the Mission Consultant had no brief to address eco-mission.

With an anthropocentric approach to mission still prevalent in many parts of the Church, perhaps Social Justice is also practically regarded as a side issue by some.
Clearly, effective environmental action can only be based on the conviction that eco-theology and eco-mission are not an optional extra but are part of the Gospel itself.

Integrating Eco Mission

I have argued that eco-mission is based on a practical theological approach to eco-theology and some of the most basic Christian doctrines; such a theologically-based approach to eco-mission therefore places it squarely within the mainstream of Christian mission. How then can an intentional approach to eco-mission be implemented and integrated into Uniting Church missional practice? In this paper I propose a 7-step program to address the basic issues.

First, reflect on the nature and mission of the Church. It is necessary to be clear about the current situation, to identify and determine to address any problem areas or issues relating to mission. There will always be a problem when the Church at whatever level has not grasped the theological imperative for creation care, when it becomes confused by the often-phoney debate about whether climate change, for example, is real, or when human greed or a simple need to survive combine with a narrow definition of “economy” to render sustainability as secondary to financial considerations.

Second, problems will also occur when the Church is effectively viewed as a club, in which case mission, however it is defined, will be in trouble. When mission is not intentional but is seized by lethargy, there is a need to go right back to the basics to rediscover what faith and church are all about. Similarly, I suspect that some of us have effectively not moved past what Habel describes as the 1st mission of the Church, or evangelisation, and that too presents a problem. However, there are some positive ways forward.

Third, take ownership of ecumenical and Uniting Church Statements about creation care, since they reflect a high degree of consensus. Clearly, effective environmental action can only be based on the conviction that eco-theology and eco-mission are not an optional extra but are part of the Gospel itself. At every level of the Church, and not least in congregational terms where there are often many competing options, what that means is the adoption of an eco-mission vision statement and periodic clarification of specific goals.

Fourth, explore ways in which other parts of the Church relate to this issue. Some insights come from unexpected sources, such as the Orthodox Church. But the Anglican Church’s widely acclaimed “Five Marks of Mission” may be regarded as particularly significant, and as a Uniting Church we would do well to consider their formal adoption. The fifth “mark of mission” specifically names creation care as part of our mission.
Fifth, include eco-theology and eco-mission as an essential part of basic ministry training. At its most basic level this does not mean extra courses but rather their inclusion in courses that are currently held. I acknowledge that this has already started to happen. My point is that one cannot adequately study basic doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and grace without including the wider perspective of the Earth. Nor can one study the theology and practice of mission without including the fundamentals of eco-mission. There will always be room for more advanced courses, but all students should at least have a grasp of the basics of eco-theology and mission prior to ordination. There is of course a wider educational element here, and this can be covered by utilising continuing education resources and lay education seminars.

Sixth, there is an on-going need to deal with structural issues in terms of where eco-mission fits in the overall program of the Church. This is not an easy matter, but there needs to be a balance between various elements. There is a need for specific expertise to assist the Church in this important aspect of its life. But consciousness of creation care must relate to the whole of our life together, whether it is in the way Synod meetings are conducted, mission consultations are structured, our use of resources or anything else.

Seventh, while I have already referred to the significance of ecumenical issues, in practical terms this is most important. At a national level, in 2011 the NCCA approved the formation of the Eco-Mission Project, and while it is likely that it will have little or no funding, high hopes are held that it will be able to play a significant role in collecting resources and coordinating eco-mission in Australia. Other initiatives will supplement this process. At a local or regional level joint projects can only add strength and effectiveness to our endeavours. A wider dimension of this ecumenical and community engagement that should not be overlooked is the possibilities of practical interfaith action. In terms of the care of the natural environment there is substantial agreement across virtually all world faiths, and there could be few better ways of breaking down barriers than sharing in the care of the only home we all have – the Earth itself.

One cannot adequately study basic doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and grace without including the wider perspective of the Earth. Nor can one study the theology and practice of mission without including the fundamentals of eco-mission.
Conclusion

I have argued that eco-mission as a dimension of eco-theology is not an "optional extra" but is part of the mainstream of Christian mission. A theology of eco-mission relates strongly with many of the primary doctrines of theology, and therefore leads to an approach that is theologically rather than pragmatically driven. At the same time, the ecological and resource crises of our time clearly sharpen the need to re-engage with an Earth-friendly hermeneutic and response. The Uniting Church has already positioned itself as a leader of this movement in Australia, but we cannot do it alone. The ethos of the Uniting Church suggests that we are well placed to engage with other Christian groups, faiths, and the wider community in addressing this critical global issue. We cannot afford for this to remain the preserve of a minority interest group; we all need to unite around this global issue.

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Disclaimer

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Mainstreaming Eco Mission: Uniting Around a Global Issue - Rev Dr Clive Ayre

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