Climate Change: A faith response

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Recent debates in the Australian Parliament, in certain sections of the media and in wider public discourse, including comments by Church leaders, have sought to dismiss or seriously downplay changes in climate across the globe and the associated environmental impacts. In Victoria a number of individuals and public commentators who would describe themselves as climate sceptics have argued that the recent rains prove their point and that what we have been experiencing here in this state for the last 10 years shows that Australia’s weather follows a cyclical pattern and has to be viewed over a 100 year period. These claims have been made despite the recent heavy rains and violent storms, which have caused havoc in Queensland and other parts of the country.

Implied in this dumbing down of the scientific data to mere emotional rhetoric is the demand to reject any so-called “Greenie agenda”. This approach reflects a chronic failure of our democratic and civil institutions to deal with issues of such magnitude as global climate change and is a worrying trend at this time. As many parts of the global community are grappling with issues of human survival in the face of floods and famines, moral debate and discourse of the highest order is a priority. Scientific reports from many quarters indicate that a number of Australia’s near neighbours will be first to be severely affected, including the loss of whole islands. What is called for is strong leadership reflecting a long-term approach to the challenges and less self-interest and reliance on emotive language on the part of all of us, and in particular our elected leaders and corporate Australia.

Free speech is an important element of a democratic society. It must, however, be associated with responsibility. Free speech is a privilege and if it is to be constructive on issues like global warming should be more than just an expression of an opinion. Sceptics of climate change and those who deny any such activity dismiss the fact that 95% of reputable scientists agree that climate change is occurring and that human activity is a major contributor. The growth of the world’s population from 6.9 billion to 9 billion by the year 2050 will continue to impact on the earth’s atmosphere and capacity to absorb the chemicals and the gases produced by current technology unless there is a rethink of lifestyles and the rate at which we are currently using resources. Part of the answer may be new technologies to reduce pollution, but it also requires a change in expectations on the part of us all to reflect the present context.

How we view the earth and its bounty in part determines how we see its durability and future. If we view the world as a playground to be enjoyed and as a reservoir of natural resources without limits, to be mined for our lifestyle and pleasure for the present, then our concern and care for and attention to
The debate on climate change needs to begin urgently with new expectations and the realisation that time may be short. Climate change is a spiritual issue, one which goes beyond the framework of economic development and political rhetoric. Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures remind us of the awesome nature of the created order and our responsibility to exercise care and attention to God’s bounty. Christians, however, cannot take the high moral ground on this matter. Our past behaviour and treatment of the earth has been less than perfect and our present response to the crisis less than compelling. Even in the current climate the voice of the church in Australia is divided and often lacks substance. Those within the church who do speak clearly and with authority on the matter are often ignored or challenged as “greenies” or “tree-huggers”. Others seem to defend church doctrine while failing to listen to the voices of scientists and others with authority. A closer and more reflective reading of the book of Genesis suggests a different picture, which challenges much of traditional church teaching on the environment and population growth. As Norma Wirzba writes in a recent edition of the Sojourners magazine:

*It ought to astound us that scripture introduces the world to us not as a supermarket but as a garden.*

In the same article she speaks about this garden as being ‘a garden of delight...to be tended and cared for’.

In reflecting on the challenges the human family faces in light of global warming and environmental degradation, people of faith need to rethink quickly and earnestly our response to the crisis. First and foremost, this requires a rethink of our views on population growth, including church teachings and attitudes towards procreation. Contraception and responsible parenthood should be part of this discussion. Secondly, our attitude to the acquisition of material goods, our use of the earth’s natural resources and our preparedness to pay additional tax to protect future generations should be part of the agenda. Unless we are proactive in each of these areas and a voice for the voiceless, we dishonour the creation and the Creator. Our approach should be to view the earth as a garden to be tended and nurtured for this and future generations. Our failure to speak out, to be an advocate for the poor and the disadvantaged, and to challenge rhetoric without substance diminishes us all and redemption for the creation remains fragile and at risk.

The next few years will be crucial and leadership from all quarters will need to disregard the rhetoric and listen to the voices of wise counsel and reason. People of faith should be in the forefront of the debates, well informed and active in
addressing the challenges in their own lives. There is a role for every one. Coalitions of like-minded individuals and networks provide an opportunity for the wider community to set the debate agenda and to move from rhetoric to substance. The media, a valuable tool and resource in a democracy for the sharing of ideas and information, should encourage a variety of opinions and voices to be heard. Together the challenge before us can be addressed and the future for generations to come a reality.