

Covid-19 and care for creation

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Covid-19 has dramatically affected the way that our communities operate. Given the immediate threat, government responses in most countries have been unprecedented in terms of community lockdowns. For the most part, world leaders took the advice of medical scientists and acted decisively to take drastic action with significant economic impact. In Australia, state, territory and federal governments worked together to mount one of the world's best responses to limiting the impact of Covid-19. At the time of writing in early July, the majority of nations are easing restrictions, even when new daily infection rates in some of those countries are at high levels. It seems that the global economic paradigm of ever-greater production and consumption can only be temporarily stalled.

This flawed global economic system is one of the key causes of the current environmental crisis. Air and water pollution are concerns in many areas. Clearing of rainforests endangers rare plant and animal species. This environmental crisis has been unfolding over many decades. The use of fossil fuels for the majority of energy to drive electricity generation, transportation, agriculture and industry is leading directly to accelerating climate change. Limiting global temperature rises to 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels requires halving net carbon-dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieving zero net emissions by 2050. Despite strident calls from the vast majority of climate scientists, few countries, including Australia, are close to achieving these figures, and most countries do not even have a strategy for a low-carbon economy.

Both of these crises—Covid-19 and the environmental crisis—pose substantial risks to our health and well-being yet the responses have been so very different. In the case of Covid-19, the challenges seem to have brought out the best in Australian community spirit, and many would like to see that spirit of cooperation and mutual support continue post Covid-19. In the case of climate change, perhaps the most urgent of the current environmental crises, the response is very different. Governments have first denied that it is a problem, then decided that even if it is a problem, it is not our problem since any local actions by a small nation will have little effect.

If we have been prepared to temporarily forgo visits to friends, overseas trips, even face-to-face church worship in order to keep our community safe, why are we, as a nation, not willing to work decisively to reduce fossil fuel use rather than face a global future with more extreme weather, more food insecurity and more displaced people? Is it because for the older ones among us that we won't need to deal with the consequences? Is it because the worst effects are likely to be among the most disadvantaged people in already poverty-stricken parts of the world?

Unlike the Covid-19 pandemic caused by a virus that unexpectedly jumped species, the environmental crisis is entirely of our own making, and our half-hearted response to the slowly evolving crisis is equally our own fault. This year marked the fifth anniversary of Pope Francis' papal encyclical *Laudato Si* about caring for our common home, and this

document is still a powerful and largely unheeded call to all Christians to reevaluate their participation in the self-destructive socio-economic paradigm of ever-increasing production and consumption. Similar calls for action have been made by many church leaders in Australia, and around the world, including many from Lutheran leaders.

Lutheran organisations have been responsible and pro-active participants in our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Congregations have quickly learnt how to deliver online forms of worship and use electronic means to ensure that vulnerable members are looked after and encouraged. Our congregations have been much less engaged in actions to address the environmental crisis. Perhaps churches are reluctant to make statements on politically divisive issues? Perhaps they don't know what to say? Is it because we are all too complicit in our flawed economic system, and it seems too hypocritical to seek to change this system from within?

The biblical witness is very clear on what our priorities should be—we are called to care for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the oppressed. Wealth, riches, greed and power are all obstacles to living in the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. And yet it is hard to see how we Christians live much differently to other Australians. Maybe we need a new Reformation—an ecological reformation.

If developed countries are to make any significant progress towards a low-carbon future, then serious self-reflection and community consensus building are needed about how to transition to a different way of living in harmony with God's good creation. During the pandemic, we have necessarily found different ways of living and working and worshipping, although we imagine these changes as temporary. As we transition out of pandemic restrictions, we need to convince each other that changing to a different long-term socio-economic model is just as necessary for the sake of global justice and intergenerational justice and to properly discharge our role as wise stewards of God's creation.

As Lutherans, we are uniquely equipped to live with the paradox of being simultaneously saints and sinners, or in the case of the climate crisis, being part of the problem while working towards a solution. Most of all, as Lutherans we have the firm hope that our God will always be with us, encouraging us and comforting us in whatever crisis we are facing.

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