

## **Submission to the Inquiry into the Environmental Impacts of Conventional Funeral Practices**

### **Preamble:**

The Uniting Church in Australia – Queensland Synod was invited to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Environmental Impacts of Conventional Funeral Practices by the Chair of the Environment and Resources Committee of the Queensland Parliament, Ms Carryn Sullivan MP.

There is no official Uniting Church in Australia position with respect to this matter but, at the request of the Moderator, Rev Bruce Johnson, the Queensland Synod Green Church Advocate, Rev Dr Clive Ayres has reflected on the questions posed for the inquiry. This submission offers his thoughts on this matter which may assist the Committee in their deliberations. These are the reflections of the Green Church Advocate and do not represent any particular viewpoint or policy stance of the Queensland Synod.

### **Introduction**

There is little doubt that in these days there is an increasing public awareness of issues such as climate change and the impact that certain practices can have on the natural environment. Many people are investing in solar energy, water conservation or other equally beneficial responses in daily living. It could be argued that in many cases funeral practices represent a “blind spot” in awareness. However, evidence suggests that there is an increasing demand for a “green” funeral option both in Australia and overseas. There is also some evidence that “baby boomers” are beginning to “push the boundaries” when it comes to funerals.

This submission argues that in this ultimate and sensitive area of concern there is a need for choice. We submit that the environmental impact of traditional means of disposing of human bodies is rather greater than has been understood, and that funeral practices need to be consistent with environmental goals generally.

### **Cremations**

Cremation is the most common form of body disposal in Australia, and while this method has some obvious advantages, not least in terms of land use and hygiene, it comes at a price. Research indicates that when all factors are taken into account, including fuel for the furnace and the burned casket, each cremation releases approximately 160kg of greenhouse

gasses into the atmosphere. If that is multiplied by the number of cremations across the country, indeed across the world each year, the environmental cost is high.

It must be understood that religious beliefs will have some bearing on the method of body disposal. In the past, for example, this has led to a preference for burial on the part of Catholics. But in India, where Hindu beliefs require cremation, the result is the loss of an estimated 50 million trees annually, in addition to 500,000 tonnes of ash and 8 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. For more pragmatic reasons, China also has decreed that in future all deceased persons should be cremated, and this represents what someone has described as “a staggering increase” in greenhouse emissions.

It may be argued that the situations so described are overseas and therefore not part of the present Inquiry. However, the environment is a global matter, and the funeral practices of highly populated countries represent a very significant contradiction of other programs designed to minimise human impacts on climate and the environment generally.

### **Burials**

It is well known that for many centuries the most traditional form of body disposal has been burial, which had the advantage of suggesting a particular location for a departed loved one, even though in terms of spiritual beliefs the person’s real identity may be perceived as being “with God” rather than with the body.

There are some obvious problems associated with this traditional practice.

1. The dedicated land required for cemeteries is usually not available for any other purpose.
2. Clearly, as the population increases, more and more land is required, and with the passing of the years this can lead to problems when families are no longer able to tend a grave, or with town planning issues or sensitivities when portion of a cemetery is required for a road, as happened in Brisbane not many years ago.

There are few obvious solutions to this problem, although some practices can ease the burden somewhat. The trend towards using the same burial place for up to three bodies can help ease the pressure on space. Even more, while it may not be readily accepted in this country, the German practice in which a burial site has a time limit of 50 years before it is re-used should at least be noted.

Cemeteries in the UK have often been associated with local Churches, and often they have become degraded and overgrown. One such site in Oxford became a haven for drug users before it was taken in hand by the Church in cooperation with the local community. The situation in this country tends to be rather different, but cemeteries may still become degraded.

A study commissioned by the Adelaide Centennial Park Cemetery Authority identified some additional environmental risks and problems associated with fuel leakages. Moreover, because a cemetery by definition is more labour intensive over a much longer period, it therefore consumes more fuel and may be, if anything, less environmentally friendly than cremation in the long term.

### **Green Funerals**

It will be obvious that it is not possible either to live or die without making an environmental impact; the issue is not the elimination of impact but its minimisation. The process might begin by reviewing the practice of embalming, which involves high toxicity. But environmentally friendly funeral practices involve much more than that, and we submit that the community is ready for the next step in what might be termed “green” funerals. A movement that has become quite popular overseas is gaining in popularity in Australia as well. There are several areas that warrant special attention.

First, the perception that respect for the deceased person demands an expensive hardwood coffin with appropriately elaborate metal trimmings, both of which are by definition non-recyclable, must be challenged. A change in mindset is imperative.

Second, once a decision has been made to seek other options, there are a variety of ways in which coffins can be more sustainable. Options that are both possible and available in some places include:

- The use of low polluting medium density materials.
- The use of recycled cardboard coffins that are weight tested for strength.
- The use of camphor laurel coffins.
- Boutique coffins may be made from cardboard, paper, woven bamboo, willow or plantation pine.

An option used by White Knight Funerals in Adelaide involves what may seem to be a more radical approach. It involves a top of the range coffin, but with the crucial difference that the underside is a trapdoor. When the coffin is lowered into the ground, the trapdoor is opened and all that is left in the ground is a shrouded body. There are two clear implications. First, the coffin is reused, since no one is honoured by wastefulness and unnecessary pollution. Second, the body is able to break down at a more normal and healthier rate, especially if the body is buried at a shallower depth than is the current normal practice.

Bushland burials have increased in popularity in Britain, and the practice is on the increase in Australia as well. As one person expressed it, he would like to see his body buried and a tree planted over it. It is true that this may not be everyone’s ideal, but it represents a choice that people need to have.

## **Recommendations**

While it is clear that public awareness, perception, and practice in such a personal and sensitive area will not change quickly, the Uniting Church nevertheless offers the following recommendations:

1. That in the long term the care of the natural environment requires a process of change in the way funeral practices are carried out.
2. That Government should recognise the environmental impacts of traditional practices, and thus affirm the principle that funeral practices should as far as possible be consistent with environmental goals.
3. That Government regulations need to enable the development of more flexible and environmentally friendly funeral practices.
4. That individuals and families should have the right to choose an environmentally friendly funeral.
5. That Funeral Directors should be required to provide information concerning funeral options with reduced environmental impacts.
6. That Government invite Churches and other interested parties to share in a basic education program aimed at reducing the negative impacts of traditional funeral practices and enhancing awareness of “green” funeral options.

Rev Dr Clive Ayres  
Green Church Advocate