



### Statement for World Environment Day – 5 June

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By Fr Brian F McCoy SJ, 2 June 2017

I have in the Province Office a few dot paintings. One of them is by an Aboriginal artist who was instrumental in bringing the Walmajarri people back to their ancestral land in 1979, after a cattle station was established on it in the early twentieth century.

His painting is a map but reveals more than a map. It describes the contours of the land, creek and waterholes. It also notes the ancient sites of significance and the places of spiritual meaning and story. I never saw or appreciated any of those deeper levels of meaning when I first visited in 1974. Over time, through friendships and participation in ceremonies, I came to see and value much more what it means to walk upon this land.

It has been clear for some years that we human beings will need to reconsider our relationship with the land if we are to preserve our world for future generations. The more we learn about the interconnectedness of life, the more we see how our decisions and actions can have far-reaching impacts, particularly on vulnerable communities in the poorest parts of the globe. Pope Francis has emphasised how serious the crisis is and how urgent the call to world leaders and Christians to address it personally and together.

‘Poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation are linked with environmental degradation’ [GC36, Decree 1, Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice, #29]. Bringing these challenges together, our work today must focus on building right relationships with God, with each other, and with creation [GC35 Decree 3, quoted in GC36, Decree 1, #21]. We know as Christians that where we have failed in our relationships, a process of reconciliation is needed. We are asked to commit ourselves to set right what has been broken.

This is why we speak of Reconciliation with Creation in our response to our environmental challenges. In committing ourselves to reconciling our relationship with creation we are asked to reflect on the impact of the choices that we make on the environment and on vulnerable communities around the world.

Our new Reconciliation with Creation task force, which has been put together by Jim Barber, my Delegate for Social Ministry, has been reflecting on these questions for us at the Province level. They have identified some valuable work that is being done in our schools, our retreat and residential houses, at Jesuit Social Services and in other ministries, which we hope to highlight and build on across the Province in the coming months.

The task force has also put forward some proposals for the Province around the impact of our investments and activities which I will outline below.

#### **Divestment from fossil fuels**

The Province has funds that must be managed in ways that will sustain the ongoing work of the Society in Australia. The key principle of the Province’s investment strategy is that all investment

decisions must reflect the mission and values of the Province. The Society of Jesus has developed and implemented 'Responsible Investment Guidelines' to assist in this.

In particular, investments should not be made in companies in which there are serious concerns about their response to social justice and environmental issues. Industries which the Province would consider to be in conflict with its mission and values include tobacco manufacturing; gambling; pornography and prostitution; and manufacture and distribution of armaments.

Our guidelines currently adopt two screening methodologies: negative screening, avoiding investment in organisations or industries which have a negative impact on society and the environment; and positive screening, searching for investments that contribute positively to society and the environment. The Province has a number of investments in companies that contribute positively to society and the environment, including social bonds, wind turbine farms and solar energy.

Moving forward, we will be working closely with our external asset managers to develop strategies to assist the Province in divesting in fossil fuel or tier 1 companies - as detailed in the Australia Institute March Report '*Climate proofing your investment: Moving funds out of fossil fuels*' - with a view to adding this to our screening requirements.

In the light of our commitment to reconciliation with creation, we believe that divestment is an ethical, impactful and valuable opportunity to consider not only for the Australian Province but for all Australian companies.

### **Flights for Forests**

Travel brings us together and can be important in building relationships across Australia and around the globe. However, aviation is also one of the leading contributors to climate change.

The Flights for Forests initiative was launched by the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific in 2011, and is now gaining interest in other parts of the world. It provides a way to offset the environmental impact of travel by contributing \$5 to the initiative for each flight taken. Funds contributed to Flights for Forests are used to support forestry and other environmental regeneration projects across the region.

I strongly encourage Jesuit communities and ministries to commit ourselves to voluntary contributions to this scheme and to do so in preference to any carbon offset programs that airlines might offer. After discussions with Province Treasury, I am proposing that the simplest way is to base this contribution on the estimated total number of flights for the year which ministries and communities already register on the annual insurance forms. Those ministries and communities who wish to be part of the scheme would be invoiced on the basis of \$5 per flight over the year, with the invoices being sent quarterly by the Province Office. We will then combine these contributions to make a quarterly Province contribution to Flights for Forests. This would mean, of course, that communities and ministries would need to include such contributions in their budgets for the year. By making the payments quarterly rather than annually, I hope we can become more conscious, in an ongoing way, of the impact of our activities on the environment.

Flights for Forests currently supports projects in the Philippines, Cambodia and Timor Leste. However, as the initiative grows the hope is to expand the number and reach of the projects that it supports. I encourage you to also consider if there are environment projects connected to your own

ministry, particularly in areas and communities that are vulnerable, that could be supported through this initiative.

Neither of these new initiatives means that we stop looking for ways to improve our carbon footprints in the way that we undertake our ministry. Individuals and ministries should also be considering whether travel is always essential, and whether other ways to make connections, such as videoconferencing, are more viable. We should look at our use of resources, and find ways to run our works more sustainably. And we should consider how we encourage the many people we interact with in our ministries to consider more deeply their own relationship with creation.

Along with this article for World Environment Day, we have a prayer resource that communities and ministries might use together. While the challenges might seem insurmountable at times, we should remember that as Pope Francis said recently, for Christians 'the future has a name, and that name is hope'. As we build partnerships across our Province, and share ideas and initiatives on how to better manage resources and reduce our impact on the environment, I hope that we also find encouragement in the knowledge that the God who is Creator guides us in our efforts.

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