

# A Human Rights-Based Approach to Systemic Advocacy on Social Justice Issues

The following guidance outlines the church's call to advocate for those in need, the human rights-based approach to systems advocacy on social justice issues and ways to plan your advocacy. It is aimed at anyone within the church who wants to use a human rights-based approach and a systemic focus to inform their advocacy work.

## Our Vision, Our Calling

Our involvement in advocacy has its origin in the Christian vision of the common good. The Prophet Micah captures this in Micah 6:8:

*"He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."*

Our vision for a transformed community seeks to give expression and witness to the vision of the Kingdom of God embodied in Jesus' love and compassion for the 'least of these' and his preferential concern for the poor and disadvantaged.

The Uniting Church in Australia has, from our very beginning, recognised at the inaugural Assembly and articulated in the [Statement to the Nation](#), that *"our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs."*

In this statement the church affirms "our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles", such as:

- the importance of every human being,
- the need for integrity in public life,
- the proclamation of truth and justice,
- the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community,
- religious liberty and personal dignity, and
- a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

The church pledges to "seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur" and "oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms."

The Statement to the Nation also commits us to:

- work for the eradication of poverty,
- work for the eradication of racism,
- affirm the rights of all people to "equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available"
- challenge values which lead to "an ever-widening gap between rich and poor"
- work to protect the environment for future generations, and
- speak into the political sphere to protect the "welfare of all persons everywhere".

The Queensland Synod also aligns its social justice work with the whole church's vision for justice, articulated in [Our Vision for a Just Australia 2025](#) which states:

*"We see a nation where each person and all creation can flourish and enjoy abundant life. The Uniting Church in Australia seeks to witness to the God given dignity and worth of every human life. We are committed to 'All that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1.1) by working towards a society characterised by love, compassion, justice, inclusion and reconciliation so that all people, at every stage of life, can experience 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10). We seek to witness to God's good gift of creation and the intrinsic worth and dignity of all people in every circumstance that is grounded in a*

*reality that is untouched by the circumstances of our lives or death. In Jesus, God is calling us to be co-workers in the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation."*

Our vision, grounded in the life and mission of Jesus, is for a nation which:

- is characterised by love for one another, of peace with justice, of healing and reconciliation, of welcome and inclusion.
- recognises the equality and dignity of each person.
- recognises coexistent sovereignty of First Peoples, has enshrined a First Nations voice and is committed to truth-telling about our history.
- takes seriously our responsibility to care for the whole of creation.
- is outward looking, a generous and compassionate contributor to a just world.

## Human Rights and Systemic Advocacy

- **Human Rights**

Human rights recognise the inherent value of each person, regardless of background, where we live, what we look like, what we think or what we believe. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect, which are shared across cultures, religions and philosophies. They are about being treated fairly, treating others fairly and having the ability to make genuine choices in our daily lives.

Respect for human rights is the cornerstone of strong communities in which everyone can make a contribution and feel included.

The Uniting Church in Australia Assembly's statement and resolution [Dignity in humanity : recognising Christ in every person](#) expresses the basis of the Church's commitment to human rights and support for international human rights instruments. This resolution encourages groups within the Church to advocate for social policy and legislative outcomes consistent with Australia's international human rights obligations. This resolution also commits the Church to respect human rights and to promote them in our work and mission. The particular commitments to human rights outlined in Dignity in Humanity are:

8. We reaffirm the *Statement on the Rights of Nature and of Future Generations* (1991) in which the Uniting Church National Assembly acknowledged "the inalienable dignity of all humans" and called for "the recognition and guarantee of human rights around the world".
11. We condemn the abuse of human rights and the failure to uphold and promote human rights as contrary to the gospel of God's love in Christ for all human beings and the earth.
12. We affirm our support for the human rights standards recognised by the United Nations (UN). Everyone has a birthright to all that is necessary for a decent life and to the hope of a peaceful future. This birthright is expressed in UN human rights instruments which describe human rights as civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. These instruments provide a valuable framework for assessing political, economic and social systems and are an important tool for peace.
13. We note that the internationally recognised human rights are indivisible, universal and inalienable:
  - a. No rights are possible without all that is necessary for a decent life, including the rights to work with just pay and conditions, adequate food and health care, adequate, appropriate and accessible housing and a safe environment, education for the full development of the human potential and the right of people to participate fully in decision-making about their common future<sup>1</sup>. Civil and political rights cannot be separated from economic, social and cultural rights.
  - b. It is the duty of all States, regardless of their cultural, economic or political systems, to promote and protect human rights and "eliminate all violations of human rights and their causes, as well as obstacles to the enjoyment of these rights"<sup>1</sup>.

- c. It is “the right and duty of the international community to hold all state and nonstate actors accountable for violations of human rights which occur in their jurisdiction or control, or for which they are directly responsible”<sup>1</sup>.
  - d. In the exercise of a person's rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of human dignity and the general welfare of a democratic society<sup>1</sup>.
14. We support the commitment of the Eighth Assembly of World Council Churches to promote and defend human rights in a way which takes into account:
- a. “the values and insights into human rights and dignity derived from the rich heritage of peoples’ religions, cultures and traditions”;
  - b. “the rights of peoples, nations, communities and their cultures as well as the rights of each individual within them”;
  - c. “the equal rights of young and old, of women and men, and of all persons irrespective of their origin or condition”<sup>1</sup>.
15. We encourage all governments to fulfil their responsibilities as members of the United Nations, recognising it as the peak forum for discourse between nations, and upholding their commitment to the UN’s Charter and to UN treaties that serve the forging of peaceful and non-exploitative international relations. Peace is served by UN member States acting towards one another and the UN in good faith.
16. We heed the call of the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee in 1995, for all churches to:
- be alert to the activities and policies of their respective governments with a view to strengthening the capacity of the UN in areas such as the promotion and protection of human rights, the struggle against racism, the enhancement of the rights of women, aid to and protection of refugees and migrants, the effective international control of production and transfer of armaments, the elimination of nuclear weapons, protection of the global environment, and the realization of a just and equitable international economic order.*
17. We urge the Australian Government to fulfil its responsibilities under the human rights covenants, conventions and treaties that Australia has ratified or signed, by upholding international standards in effecting social and legislative change.
18. We pledge to assess current and future national public policy and practice against international human rights instruments, keeping in mind Christ’s call and example to work for justice for the oppressed and vulnerable.
19. We declare our opposition to capital punishment and commit ourselves to stand against the death penalty wherever it exists, regarding it as a cruel and inhuman punishment which denies the ability of an offender to reform.
20. We urge the Australian Government to develop and promote human rights education which, consistent with the recommendations of the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, includes peace, democracy, development and social justice, and aims to foster mutual understanding, healthy and harmonious communities, and justice and peace.
21. We commit the Uniting Church National Assembly to promote an increased awareness and understanding of human rights through our education, justice and mission programs and to stand in solidarity with our partner churches as they advocate and work for human rights in their countries.
22. We encourage all members, groups, congregations and agencies of the Uniting Church to model respect for human rights in their daily lives and to advocate for policies consistent with human rights

standards and against violations of human rights in all forms, both within Australia and internationally.

23. We encourage the councils of the Uniting Church to model respect for human rights in their work and mission, including working towards an end to manifestations of greed, corruption, violence, persecution and exclusion.

### Australia's human rights commitments

Australia is a signatory to a range of internal human rights instruments, including the following international human rights treaties:

- the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#)
- the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)
- the [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#)
- the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#).
- The Australian Government also supports the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons](#) as a non-legally binding document.

Queensland's [Human Rights Act 2019](#) protects some human rights of people in Queensland.

- **Systemic Advocacy**

Systemic advocacy seeks to solve social justice issues that affect groups of people, by working to change laws, policies, systems, practices, and programs to improve equality in society<sup>i</sup>. These changes can benefit many people and can have a positive effect on society.

Systemic advocacy involves a range of actions that can be used on their own or in combination, such as engaging with the media, engaging with decision-makers, education and awareness campaigns, community organising, and more.

A human rights-based approach to systemic advocacy is about empowering people to know and claim their rights and increasing the accountability of individuals and institutions who are responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights<sup>ii</sup>. It empowers advocates to challenge existing and proposed practices that may put the human rights of particular groups or individuals at risk, as it provides a way to negotiate fairness and good practice<sup>iii</sup>.

### Planning your Advocacy

There are many ways of planning for systemic advocacy on social justice issues. Two commonly used planning processes are used below with some example responses to the questions to guide your thinking.

#### The FAIR approach

The steps of the FAIR approach to systemic advocacy are<sup>iv</sup>:

- **Facts:** What is the experience of the individuals involved and what are the important facts to understand? Example: *A group of workers are told by their local employer that they must work for free for three months in order to secure a permanent job.*
- **Analyse rights:** Develop an analysis of the human rights at stake. Section 18 of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) provide the right of "Freedom from forced work": (2) A person must not be made to

perform forced or compulsory labour. There are some restrictions on this right, but they don't apply to this situation.

- **Identify responsibilities:** Identify what needs to be done and who is responsible for doing it. The employer should be informed that they are breaching human rights by telling workers that they have to do forced labour to secure a permanent job. A complaint could be lodged with the Queensland Human Rights Commission by the workers.
- **Review actions:** Make recommendations for action and evaluate what has happened as a result. The employer is informed that they are breaching human rights. If they do not remedy the situation after this, a complaint is lodged with the Queensland Human Rights Commission.

## Nine questions for strategic advocacy

These questions can be used for both planning an advocacy strategy and to develop specific advocacy initiatives <sup>v</sup>:

- **Question 1:** What do we want? (Goals) *A local homeless shelter built for older women.*
- **Question 2:** Who can give it to us? (Audiences) *The local council and/or the state government.*
- **Question 3:** What do they need to hear? (Messages) *The personal stories and the numbers of homeless older women in the local community.*
- **Question 4:** Who do they need to hear it from? (Messengers) *Leaders within the local community.*
- **Question 5:** How do we get them to hear it? (Delivery) *Meeting with state Minister and local state MPs, meeting with council members.*
- **Question 6:** What have we got? (Resources; strengths) *Identify local groups who could support your goal, such as community services, sporting clubs, local businesses and other faith groups.*
- **Question 7:** What do we need to develop? (Challenges and gaps) *Develop options for the decision-makers, such as identifying suitable vacant land or a building not being used.*
- **Question 8:** How do we begin? (First steps) *Take the options you have developed to the meetings and follow-up after the meetings.*
- **Question 9:** How will we know it's working, or not working? (Monitoring and evaluation) *Whether the local council or state government responds and whether the local or state media report on the issue.*

**IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR WANT TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ADVOCACY WORK OF THE CHURCH PLEASE EMAIL [social.justice@ucaqld.com.au](mailto:social.justice@ucaqld.com.au) or [sustainability@ucaqld.com.au](mailto:sustainability@ucaqld.com.au)**

---

<sup>i</sup> UNICEF (2010). Advocacy Toolkit. <https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNICEF%20Advocacy%20Toolkit.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Human Rights Commission (2022). The FAIR approach - putting a human rights-based approach into practice. <https://careaboutrights.scottishhumanrights.com/section1-page03.html>

<sup>iii</sup> United Nations Population Fund (2014). The Human Rights-Based Approach. <https://www.unfpa.org/human-rights-based-approach>

<sup>iv</sup> Scottish Human Rights Commission (2022). The FAIR approach - putting a human rights-based approach into practice. <https://careaboutrights.scottishhumanrights.com/section1-page03.html>

<sup>v</sup> UNICEF (2010). Advocacy Toolkit. <https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNICEF%20Advocacy%20Toolkit.pdf>