

Energy for Life

In last month's column Alice Murray described the climatic events underlying the record dry winter in southern Australia and the predictions of a worse summer ahead. This month, Rev Linda Chapman explores possible responses to the underlying causes of human-mediated global warming.

All life requires energy to maintain existence. We know energy in a variety of forms – heat, light, food and so on. The electricity with which we power our modern lives comes predominantly from the fossil fuels of this earth – the coal that generates our large power plants, the oil that drives our cars. So where does this energy come from in the ultimate sense? If one is Christian, the answer to that would surely be that energy is a free gift of God the Creator (that is, before human systems impose monetary charges!). If that is the case do we consider carefully enough our use of this gift? And, if we consider ourselves co-creators with God, do we consider how we might give as well as receive this energy? In this article we consider alternatives to sources of energy that produce much of the greenhouse gas emissions contributing to global climate change.

The present investigation into the viability of nuclear energy in Australia at least has the benefit of raising the issue of other, renewable energy sources. Australia, unlike Europe, seems to be seriously lagging behind in efforts to both move ahead with non-nuclear renewable energy sources and reduction in energy consumption. For example in Berlin some 80% of new buildings have solar-powered energy generators. In the Netherlands, acoustic barriers along motor ways are topped with solar panels that provide energy for housing and industry. Holland has installed 'hot road' energy systems that provide heating and cooling for local houses (every kilometer of road heats around 100 houses).

The city of Woking, in England, has installed its own local wiring system that generates 135% of its energy needs, making it possible for that city to come off the national energy grid in the next few years. This is one example of a possible shift from energy systems that are about big power generation to more local energy networks that reduce the waste due to energy loss. Presently, large power stations lose up to about 60% of energy before the energy is fed into a grid, where it leaks more energy. These large power generators are not only inefficient, they will increasingly struggle to keep up with the insatiable energy demands of consumers. A national system of local energy networks is a possible alternative. In this system every part of our infrastructure could act, not just as a consumer of energy, but as a supplier as well. Homes, schools, workplaces, hospitals and so on could become generators of sustainable energy. Such local energy generation can happen on the scale required. The city of London's Climate Change Program aims to make it self-sufficient in energy within a decade. The shift from large scale coal powered stations supplying national grids to more local energy systems utilizing renewable sources, such as solar, wind and other creative options, seems entirely possible if not visionary and revolutionary.

Nuclear power seems an unnecessary risk when there is so much creative potential for the development and use of other renewable energy sources and systems. More local renewable energy systems, public education in energy efficiency, local food co-ops and growers markets, better public transport systems and hybrid and other emerging technology vehicles seem much safer and less expensive options than nuclear power.

As the People of God we do well to consider our own energy use and the ways in which we might contribute to a future where we are part of a system that not only consumes but also produces energy. A simple example would be to install a solar energy panel if that is possible. We might also consider our own power as citizens in encouraging all levels of government to support renewable energy initiatives. We could write to our local MPs expressing our desire for government support for alternative energy research and use. Investment in alternatives to coal fired power stations seems patently more life-giving and less expensive than nuclear power.

The future need not be determined by old ways of thinking and doing. Jesus was a prophet who was rejected, in part, because he named the change that was needed. He remains a prophet today. Are we listening? Or are we rejecting the prophetic and visionary voice of this age that names our present energy use as unsustainable and calls us to embrace new ways of living?

The gospel should be good news for the whole of creation. Will we respond to the challenge to be co-creators of a sustainable future for the generations to come?