Rationale

# Background to the Synod 2003 resolution on depleted uranium weapons

In 2001 and 2002, the NSW Synod has passed resolutions opposing war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Uniting Church, as a result of its belief in God as Creator and Christ as both redeemer and peacemaker, has committed itself to:

- Peacemaking and nonviolence
- Human rights and respect for all people
- Environmental responsibility
- Justice and relationships, rather than weapons, as the way to genuine security.

We also recognizes the value of the "precautionary principle", which is that if there is a threat of serious harm to environment or health, lack of full scientific certainty should not stop measures that reduce harm to people or the environment (1993 NSW Synod).

The proposal on depleted uranium (DU) weapons is a further step in such work, looking at the problems created by one type of weapon used in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The proposed statement arises out of work that UnitingCare NSW.ACT has done this year on DU weapons, as part of its involvement in the tour of Dr Doug Rokke to Australia to speak about depleted uranium weapons. UnitingCare was one of several church and community organisations involved in sponsoring the tour, and played a major role in the Sydney tour. In addition to Frances Milne and Ann Wansbrough having private discussions with Dr Rokke, there were several meetings at which these issues were presented and discussed – a public meeting organized by the tour committee, a public meeting organized by Scientists for Global Responsibility, a meeting with Iraqis living in Sydney, and a meeting with politicians hosted by Dr Meredith Burgmann, President of the Legislative Council. There were a number of media interviews. All these helped build the case against DU. Uniting Justice agencies in some other synods also supported the tour.

Dr Rokke is an academic in the area of environmental health physics. He has also had a long career in the USA military reserves. He was Director of the project to clear up depleted uranium debris and materiel after the 1991 Gulf War, and prepared training videos for the military on safety precautions in handling DU. He is an authority on how depleted uranium actually behaves in the field. He himself suffers from the effects of exposure to DU. Dr Rokke brought with him documents and videos that provided evidence to back his case, and his call for action.

DU weapons are made with uranium. Uranium occurs in several forms or isotopes. Most of it is U238. The form used in nuclear energy reactors is U235, which is only a very small portion of natural uranium. So after some of the small amount of U235 has been obtained for reactors, most of the natural uranium is left as a waste product. It is a heavy, toxic, radioactive metal that has to be carefully stored unless some other use is found for it. Because storage costs are high, it is available for other uses at very little cost.

DU weapons rely on the physical and chemical properties of uranium, a very heavy metal that is dense and pyrophoric, that is, it burst into flames when the temperature is high enough. It is self-sharpening, so that it continues through a barrier where other metals would become blunt and stop. DU is used in a wide variety of weapons and is particularly useful against tanks, since it penetrates the armour, generating enough heat to burst into flames and destroy everything in the tank, including the people and weapons. When it burns, it forms very small particles of uranium oxide, which can be inhaled. Since they are not soluble, some particles lodge in the lungs. Uranium oxide can also be absorbed through water and food. The body can also absorb uranium from DU fragments in wounds or cuts. Once in the body, DU and the radiation from it have quite different effects from when it is outside the body, since it has now become part of the chemistry of the body. Uranium tends to accumulate in particular parts of the body, such as bones and the kidneys.

The official government view in the USA is that the debris of DU weapons is not dangerous. They claim scientific studies support this. However, they admit that they are only monitoring about 33 people who have DU fragments in their body (as a result of "friendly fire"), not the many troops or the civilians in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Somalia who have been exposed to the uranium oxide dust from these weapons or whose children have played with DU debris left lying on the ground.

Recent reports of the United Nations Environmental Program post-combat assessment office, the World Health Organisation and the Royal Society all point to the lack of actual population studies to assess the actual effects of exposure to DU. While each of these bodies adopts a conservative approach, they also urge proper monitoring of the people exposed to DU and clean up of DU debris. The WHO notes a number of studies which show DU exposure causing negative health effects in animals. They have also expressed concern about young children exposed to DU debris. The only attempt to study the effects of DU debris on a population appears to be in Iraq, which held a conference in 1994. The US dismissed this as propaganda. However, there is considerable evidence of children born in Iraq or born to US veterans with terrible birth defects and of children and adults having high rates of cancers, whether from DU or from other toxic substances released during the war. In the absence of any population studies, the US view would appear to be equally appropriately described as propaganda. The stories of people in the nations where the weapons have been used, and the stories of troops themselves who have been exposed, suggest that there is a serious problem.

In June 2003, the Nuclear Policy Research Institute held a Symposium on the Health Effects of Depleted Uranium Munitions, which supported the view that DU is a health hazard, while recognizing the need for more adequate research. New techniques have recently been developed to assist in assessing DU exposure.(http://www.nuclearpolicy.org/NewsArticle.cfm?NewsID=79) The UK government announced in August that all veterans who served in the 1991Gulf or in the 2003 war in Iraq will be able to have themselves tested for DU exposure. An article in *ADF Health*, April 2003, argues that there is little danger from DU weapons, but relies on estimates of likely exposure (based on the WHO and Royal Society studies), not actual testing of military personnel for DU. There is some evidence that DU weapons factories in the US have caused some pollution, with at least one factory in Albany being closed down for this reason. Given all this, it is reasonable to apply the precautionary principle and take action to prevent the possible

harm, putting the onus on those who want to use DU in weapons to show that its dust and debris is not harmful to people.

The USA attempted to clean up some of its vehicles in Kuwait after the 1991 Iraq War, but made no attempt to clean up Iraq itself. It has announced that it will not clean up the DU–contaminated debris from the recent war in Iraq.

Australia used DU weapons from 1981-1990. It stopped using them because of health and safety concerns. (Speech by Senator Lyn Allison, 17 June 2003). However, many other nations use them.

"It is thought that between 17 and 20 states, approximately, have weapons incorporating depleted uranium in their arsenals. They include the USA, the UK, France, Russia, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Pakistan, Thailand, Iraq and Taiwan. While only the US and the UK have acknowledged using DU weapons, its use by other states cannot be excluded." (**Avril McDonald, LL.M., Ph.D.** – ***International Legal Ramifications of DU Weapons***., see http://www.nuclearcommonsense.org/symposium/mcdonald_jun_14_03.pdf)

Further information, including links to a number of the relevant reports, is available at www.anti-bases.org/campaigns.

DU weapons can be viewed as likely to be similar to landmines – unnecessarily injurious and indiscriminate in their effects, with the debris harming troops of both sides and civilians after the battle has ended. At least one United Nations committee has declared DU weapons illegal.

The Uniting Church in its peace and social justice work adopts the view "from the bottom" rather than the top – the view of those who are least powerful and most vulnerable. The stories of people like Doug Rokke, and the concerns of the people of Iraq, require us to take action.