

JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

MAY 2020



WHAT DOES THE COVID-19 CRISIS MEAN FOR THE SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK OF THE SYNOD?

The COVID-19 crisis has impacted significantly on the social justice work of the Synod. It means there cannot be any in-person meetings with congregation members. It also means there cannot be any face-to-face meetings with Members of Parliament, public servants or representatives of corporations to be able to discuss social justice concerns.

Some of these engagements are still taking place using online video call platforms like Zoom or Skype, or by old-

fashioned phone calls.

All the members of the Justice and International Mission cluster are working from home.

At the time of writing, the Commonwealth and State Parliaments have been suspended, meaning legislative reforms cannot be progressed.

Ministers and Members of Parliament are getting thousands of e-mails a day from people wanting their particular concern addressed. That makes it very hard for any specific e-mail or social media post to get noticed and paid attention to.

Members of the cluster will continue to reach out and

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connect with congregation members and other supporters by phone and online communication platforms.

Theologically, the COVID-19 crisis challenges our commitment to our love of neighbour. As Christians, we are called to look beyond ourselves and the people we love as family and friends. We are called to show love for everyone. The physical

separation we are going through is about saving the lives of people from the virus, especially those most vulnerable.

Locally congregations have shown social support for each other while keeping physically separated. People in the community have been providing meals to those in need. Our governments have stepped up with support payments to keep

people in jobs and extra social security payments to save people from destitution at this time.

However, we must not forget that our love of our neighbours needs to extend across Australia's borders. We must not allow this crisis to cause us to lose our focus and our commitment to seek a just world for everyone, especially people in developing countries. •

DENISSE SANDOVAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

The crisis has affected everyone as it doesn't discriminate against class or visa status.

It has changed my personal life and my work life, as I am sure it has affected yours.

Personally, I am worried about all my friends and family here and in New York. My parents, brothers, sister in law, niece and nephew all live on Long Island, New York. Long Island is a 45-minute drive from Queens where the virus is already overwhelming the local hospitals. My family are staying at home and only going out for grocery shopping. My mother has lost her job, but my father still has his. He does landscaping, and that has been categorised as an essential service. My sister-in-law has lost her job as well as a direct result of the coronavirus. Luckily my father has been able to hire my brother to work

with him in landscaping. As a result, the family is going to be OK, financially.

Work-wise, I am working from home alongside my two-year-old child. She has the sniffles and is coughing, so she is not allowed at day care until her symptoms stop. It has been a challenge keeping her busy, but it is also a blessing to be at home with a joyful child.

During this time, I won't be able to meet our supporters face-to-face like we used to. We won't be able to attend Sunday services and meet you face-to-face, but we can interact on video conference, phone calls and e-mails. A lot of my work involves face-to-face engagement, as I offer training and presentations on community organising for congregations. But now with the virus, I am looking at offering online classes for anyone interested. We



could structure a training session so that it suits an online platform such as Zoom. Please let me know if you are interested in this. My e-mail is denisse.sandoval@victas.uca.org.au

If you are feeling anxious and isolated, please reach out for a phone call or a video chat. Let's all keep trying to keep each other's spirits up so that we can support each other emotionally. This is a time of communal grieving and we need each other more than ever. •

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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All of the resources in this mailing can be found on the JIM website.

If you would like to subscribe (or unsubscribe) to either this hardcopy mailing (bi-monthly) or email update (weekly), contact the JIM Cluster.

TIM MOLINEUX

SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

Communities and individual are looking for innovative ways to remain connected and engaged during this crisis.

In the last month, I've been in two countries, the Philippines and Australia, and I've been moved by the concern and patience being generously given and received between strangers during this challenging time. While we adjust to whatever this 'new normal' is, we must all remember to continue being kind to one another. Be supportive where you can, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it yourself.

My work as Social Justice Officer has also been impacted by this 'new normal'. As you can imagine, there's been a rapid shifting priority over the last few weeks while we adapt. Some key areas are:

- *Congregational Resource on the Statement from the Heart*: While momentum was building on the development of this resource thanks a focus group workshop that was facilitated by St Luke's

in Mt Waverly, this resource is now waiting on more Synod staff time being freed up so a reference group can form to assist in further development.

- *Social Justice Networks*: With congregations no longer meeting in person as we all practice physical distancing, the idea of forming geographical social justice networks within presbyteries is still an ongoing area of exploration. I continue to meet with interested congregations (via Zoom) who are willing to join in these conversations.
- *Youth and Young Adults*: Now, there is the possibility of exploring if a dedicated young adult and youth social justice space within the church could operate digitally.
- *JustACT Website*: After a lot of trial and error, and several delays, the JustACT Website site would have been up and running as you read this article. It's been a bit of a learning curve around new website management and

editing skills. We are attempting to respond to the changing needs of congregations as we find ways to exploit what a digital online space has to offer. At the beginning of April, I took over responsibility for the development of the website. Please direct any questions about the site to me.

There are many lessons to be learned while we all face the challenges that COVID-19 brings. Primarily, what it means to be physically distanced from people, while still trying to stay socially interconnected. I continue to see a growing shared commonality as we face adversity together. Every day that passes, I'm reminded of the extraordinary power that collective action can achieve for societal change in the pursuit of good. My only question is, will we carry the lessons we have learned beyond this current crisis, and into the future? •

MARK ZIRNSAK

SENIOR SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

My work has been on addressing social justice issues impacted directly by the COVID-19 crisis.

The immediate need has been for people on temporary visas and people who have applied for asylum in Australia. There has been work with congregations to ensure people from the Pacific on the Seasonal Worker Program do not become unlawful due to their existing visa ending. Also, that they continue to have jobs. For people who have

applied for asylum, people on Temporary Protection Visas and people on other temporary visas the Commonwealth Government has failed to provide social security support or other forms of income support. I have been part of the broader campaigns seeking to ensure these people are not pushed into destitution in Australia and have access to Medicare during the crisis.

Work also continues on developing resources on critical social justice issues to be

addressed when the COVID-19 crisis is over. These resources include congregational resources around climate change and addressing online child sexual abuse. There is also significant work on seeking measures to curb family violence. There is work with the Refugee Council of Australia to seek pathways where people on temporary protection visas can be given permanent refugee status in Australia. •

TRUTH AND TRUST ARE ESSENTIAL TO FINDING HOPE AS WE FACE CHALLENGES LIKE CLIMATE CHANGE

Leading theologian Professor Jürgen Moltmann has recently released his latest book “The Spirit of Hope. Theology for a World in Peril”. He provides useful insights on how Christians should respond to climate change.

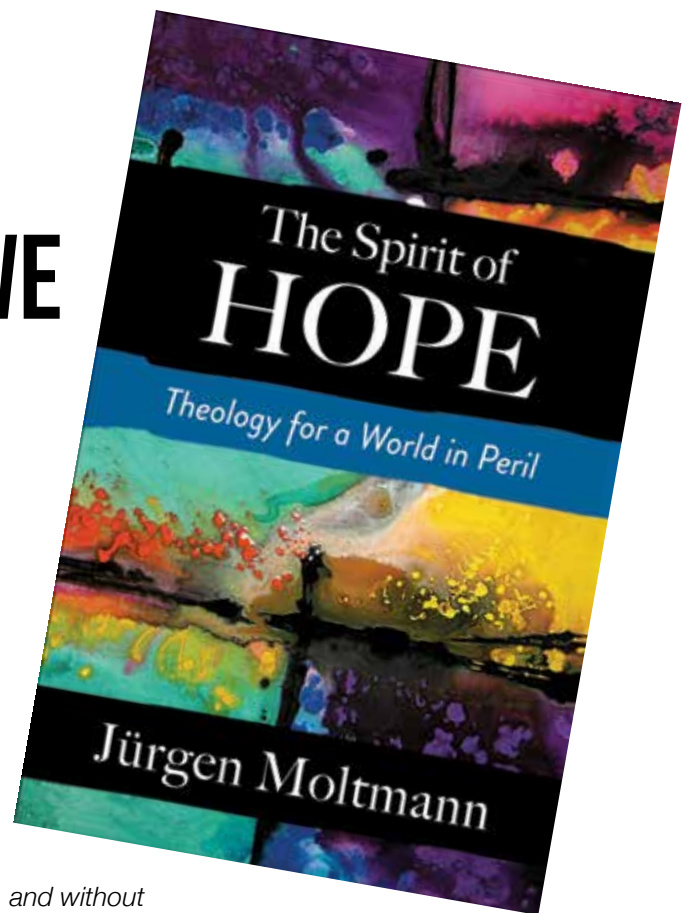
He has argued we live in a time “in which objective truth no longer exists, in which any given claim can be substantiated and in which it is no longer possible to tell falsehood and truth apart.”

“Truth creates trust and trust creates peace, and without peace, life is not possible. The fight for truth against falsehood is a matter of life and death. It is the struggle for the survival of humankind”, said Professor Moltmann.

In reflecting on how we, as Christians, should relate to our natural environment, Moltmann suggests:

Before we human beings “till and keep” the earth and assume any rule over the world or any responsibility for creation, the earth cares for us. It creates the conditions that are favourable for the human race and has preserved it down to the present day. It is not that the earth is entrusted to us: we are entrusted to the earth. The earth can live without us human beings, but we cannot live without the earth.

According to the new ecological way of reading the same creation narratives in the Bible, the human being is the last being God creates and therefore, the most dependent of all God’s creations. For their life on earth, human beings are dependent on the existence of animals and plants, air and water, light, daytime and night-time, sun, moon, and stars,



and without

these things, we cannot live.

Human beings exist only because all these other creatures exist. The other creatures can all exist without the human being, but human beings cannot exist without them. So it is impossible to conceive of the human being as a divine potentate, or as a solitary gardener, over against nature.

Human beings are part of nature, in their own character, in their destiny, and in their hope for life. So they do not stand at the centre of the world. If they are to survive, they must integrate themselves into nature and into the community of their fellow beings. They are not entitled to the arrogance of power over nature and the liberty to do with it what they like. Their attitude should rather be characterised by a “cosmic humility” and by an attentive respect in all their interventions in nature. It is only when we become aware of our dependence on the life of the earth and on the existence of other living things that we shall turn from being what Luther called “proud and unhappy gods” into truly human beings. True knowledge is not power; true knowledge is wisdom.

Professor Moltmann’s book can be purchased online.



BRUNSWICK UNITING CHURCH PLAN TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE IN THEIR CONGREGATION

BY REV RICHARD ARNOLD

Back in August 2019, Brunswick Uniting was invited by Gavin Mountjoy, a member of Westgate Baptist Church, to consider declaring a Climate Emergency.

A group of members came together and began sharing ideas and reflecting on information from Gavin. We all agreed that we wanted a declaration which was “more than words”. We also wanted to be guided by our faith and so reflected on UCA President Deidre Palmer’s letter to congregations concerning climate change.

We also screened the movie “2040” which gave some inspirational visions of what is possible now, using technology that already exists. This helped build interest in and commitment to a declaration.

The Climate Action Group brought a resolution to Church Council which was subsequently presented to a congregational meeting in November 2019. The resolution below was unanimously adopted:

Declaration:

BUC recognises that we are in a state of climate crisis

that requires urgent action for climate justice by all levels of government, business, the community, as well as by individuals.

Commitments:

Under the direction of Church Council, and in consultation with local Aboriginal people, BUC will develop a Climate Crisis Plan for the church community by May 2020, including goals and action plans for the following commitments.

BUC will continue to develop our theological understanding and our personal & collective discipleship as the people of God living in a time of climate crisis.

The plan will include specific targets for BUC to become carbon positive. We will encourage and empower households to do the same.

BUC, both collectively and as individual members, will engage with the wider church, as well as other faith communities, groups and people in our local communities, on the climate crisis.

BUC, both collectively and as individual members, will urge all levels of government, as well as business, to declare a climate crisis and commit to restoring

a safe climate by immediately allocating the necessary resources across the economy, and by changing unsustainable business practices.

BUC will commit resources to implement the plan, consistent with the targets and timelines that it will spell out, noting the urgency in times of crisis.

Brunswick Uniting is now working on developing the Climate Action Plan. The plan will enable us to discern the most strategic and effective use of our time and resources. It will be a living document which will continually evolve.

We have sought ideas from the congregation through several activities after worship, and each of the committees of Church Council has also given input. We anticipate that much of the plan will be implemented by our committees.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, the detailed plan won’t be finalised by May. Still, we are already taking action on the major commitments.

More information on Brunswick Uniting’s climate action can be found on our website, <https://brunswick.unitingchurch.org.au/>. Just click the “Earth Button” on our Welcome page. •

VIC GOVERNMENT LIFTS BAN ON NATURAL GAS DEVELOPMENTS BUT MAINTAINS A BAN ON FRACKING

In March 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government requesting that they maintain the moratorium on conventional gas drilling onshore in Victoria and the ban on fracking for natural gas.

As a fossil fuel, natural gas contributes to greenhouse gas emissions at a time when we should be doing everything reasonably possible to reduce emissions. Fracking involves injecting water, sand and chemicals at high pressure in natural gas deposits to extract the gas.

On 17 March 2020, the Victorian Government announced it would lift the moratorium on onshore natural gas development, but maintain the ban on fracking. Exploration will start from 1 July 2021.

Modelling by Ernst and Young found few long term jobs would be created by the onshore natural gas developments, after exploration and construction, between 78 and 242. The gas developments are likely to take place in the Otways and East Gippsland.

Even Chief Executive of multinational gas corporation Santos, Kevin Gallagher, pointed out the environmental harms done by conventional natural gas development and fracking are the same. He told the media “the distinction between conventional and unconventional resources is an economic one, not an environmental one.”

The Victorian Coalition Opposition supported the lifting of the natural gas exploration and development moratorium, as long as landowners agreed to the development and received a share in the royalties. The Coalition has stated they

“do not support fracking or coal seam gas extraction in Victoria.

Victoria’s brown coal resources are unsuitable for fracking, and a Liberal Nationals Government will maintain a permanent ban on fracking in this state.”

In February 2020, the Commonwealth Government made public a threat that it would not fund any multibillion-dollar energy deal with the Victoria Government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and lower power costs unless the Victorian Government removed the moratorium on natural gas exploration.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of the Victorian Government continuing to block further natural gas development. •

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT TO LEGISLATE A SPENT CONVICTIONS SCHEME

In October 2019, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government in support of the establishment of a spent conviction scheme.

A criminal conviction can stick with a person for a lifetime. It can result in discrimination against getting a job, even when the conviction has no relevance to the work. It can act as a barrier to a person getting their life back on track. The impact has been significant for First Peoples. The Commonwealth and state

governments across Australian have introduced laws that allow certain types of criminal offences not to be disclosed to employers. These are known as spent conviction laws. Victoria is currently the only state in Australia that does not have a spent conviction law.

On 27 February 2020, the Victorian Government announced that it would introduce spent conviction legislation to ensure that old criminal records for eligible crimes do not impact on a person’s opportunity to gain employment.

Certain convictions, such as for serious sexual or violent crimes, will not be eligible to not be disclosed on a police check. Police and the courts will continue to have full access to a person’s criminal history.

The government said it would consult with police, lawyers, victims of crime organisations and First People organisations on the design of the scheme.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of a spent convictions scheme being introduced in Victoria. •

FORTESCUE METALS CONTINUE COURT BATTLE AGAINST FIRST PEOPLE LAND RIGHTS

In February 2018, we requested that you write letters to mining corporation Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) to drop their legal action to contest the native title rights of First Peoples in the Solomon Hub in WA.

In July 2017 a First Peoples group in the Pilbara, Western Australia, won a famous native title case in the Federal Court. The Court ruled that the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC) had native title over an area of land in the Pilbara. However, the ruling continues to be contested by FMG.

The Uniting Church ethical investment arm, U Ethical, holds shares in FMG, which is a key reason why the Synod has taken up this concern. U Ethical has pursued a meeting with FMG to discuss the issue.

At the centre of the decade-long dispute is the issue of compensation. FMG refuse to pay the local Yindjibarndi compensation for extracting iron ore from a mine that they operate on the Yindjibarndi land. That mine is estimated to contain up to \$280 billion of iron ore.



In October 2019, five Federal Court judges unanimously rejected FMG's appeal against the native title ruling.

Andrew Forrest, Chairman of the FMG Board, was reported in the press to have made derogatory and disparaging remarks against the local First Peoples' community in Roebourne. He reportedly told shareholders at the FMG annual meeting on 29 October "That is not a community I'm going to empower with tens of millions of your cash."

Unfortunately, in November 2019, FMG indicated that they would continue to contest the native title decision and lodge a High Court appeal against it. FMG has ignored public calls from the WA Government to drop the case.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to FMG, despite the corporation's intransigence to recognise the native title rights of the Yindjibarndi as upheld by the courts. •

ANZ PAYS COMPENSATION TO PEOPLE DISPLACED BY SUGAR PLANTATION IN CAMBODIA

Since 2014, we had encouraged you to write letters and send postcards to the ANZ bank to pay compensation to people in Cambodia that had been forced off their land by Phnom Penh Sugar in 2011.

The ANZ Royal Bank, the Cambodian subsidiary of the ANZ Bank, provided finance to Phnom Penh Sugar. The ANZ bank had admitted the funding to Phnom Penh Sugar had breached their ethical standards.

In late February 2020, the ANZ

agreed to pay compensation to more than one thousand Cambodian families who had been forcibly removed from their land. The ANZ will pay out the profit they made on the loan to Phnom Penh Sugar. The ANZ acknowledged that its initial due diligence before making the loan had been inadequate. The ANZ stated that it recognised the continuing hardships faced by the families who had been forced off their land.

"We have experienced huge difficulties with our livelihoods since the sugar company took our land almost ten years ago, and this contribution will greatly help our situation", said Soeung Sokhom, a

representative of the affected families. "The whole affected community, including me, are deeply grateful that ANZ has resolved our complaint."

The ANZ ended its relationship with Phnom Penh Sugar in 2014. The ANZ sold its Cambodian business in 2018.

The ANZ has committed to reviewing and strengthening its human rights policies and grievance mechanisms.

The Uniting Church is a shareholder in the ANZ through its ethical investment body, U Ethical.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters and sent postcards to the ANZ on this issue. •

GOVERNMENT AGREES TO EXTEND VISAS FOR PEOPLE FROM THE PACIFIC ON TEMPORARY WORK SCHEMES

In March 2020, we issued an urgent call for people to write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking for people on temporary visas and people who have applied for asylum be provided with income support and access to Medicare while they remain in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis.

The request also included extending the existing visas for people whose visa was due to expire and who were unable to leave

Australia.

On 4 April, the Commonwealth Government announced that people from Pacific Islands working on the Seasonal Worker Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme will be able to get a one-year extension to their visas to allow them to continue working legally in Australia.

Working Holiday Makers will be able to continue to work in agriculture and food processing will be able to continue to work for an existing employer. They will be able to have their visa extended if the visa was due to expire in the next six months.

Employers will need to commit to

providing safe accommodation for agricultural workers that complies with social distancing requirements.

The Government will also allow people on temporary visas with work rights will be able to access any superannuation they have in Australia to support themselves.

However, negatively, the Commonwealth Government has called on all people on temporary visas unable to support themselves to return home. The government's call appears to ignore the reality that many countries have closed their borders, and there are few international flights still running. Many people on Working Holiday Maker visas report trying to exit Australia, but repeatedly having their flights cancelled.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters in support of ensuring that all people in Australia will not be left destitute and without access to health care in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. •

GOVERNMENTS GLOBALLY PUT COMPANIES ON NOTICE OVER ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

In June 2019, we requested that you write to the Australian Government in support of making the online world safer for all people, especially children.

The request had followed up from an invitation to you in April 2019 to write to Google and Facebook to assist police in detecting and investigating online child sexual abuse.

On 5 March 2020, the Governments of Australia, Canada, the US, UK and New Zealand announced that they had concluded Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. The Principles were developed

in consultation with six significant technology corporations and a broad range of other businesses, civil society groups and academics. The JIM cluster was one of the bodies consulted by the five governments. The principles require technology corporations to prevent their services from being used for the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and to report detected cases to the appropriate authorities.

Australian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that provide service to 98% of Australians also agreed in March 2020 to a new regime allowing them to be ordered to block websites that host material depicting terrorist attacks or violent crimes. Under the agreement, the Australian eSafety Commissioner will be able to direct

ISPs to block websites for a minimum of five days to protect Australians from viewing "horrific" content in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

Australian ISPs had previously agreed to block eight websites that refused to remove the video by the man who committed mass murder in mosques in Christchurch in March 2019.

There are fears that the significant increase in the use of online socialising apps during the COVID-19 crisis will cause a surge in the number of sexual predators targeting children.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of making the online world a safer place for everyone, especially children. •