

JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

JULY 2020



BUILD BACK BETTER

At the time of writing, we are moving towards reducing the lockdown restrictions that our governments used to keep us safe and reduce the deaths and suffering from COVID-19.

In responding to the crisis, our governments did things that previously they had resisted doing. Support for people who were no longer in paid employment was doubled. Homeless people were provided hotel accommodation, to protect them and the broader community from the spread of the virus. Child care services were provided without charging families a fee for them.

Of course, the COVID-19 crisis still has a while to run yet. At the time of writing, the epicentre of COVID-19 related deaths was moving from Western Europe and the US to developing countries. Many developing countries will be very vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 due to their more limited health care systems.

The question we face as a community is, do we need to return to the way things were before the COVID-19 crisis, or can we build back to something better?

On 15 May the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the Council of World Mission issued a joint statement about the world we should seek to build as we move to recover from

the COVID-19 crisis. They stated:

Even as capitalism supplants the impulses to love, care, and share with the urge to compete, the crisis has seen communities all over the world mobilising deep reserves of compassion, kindness, and generosity, particularly where markets have failed. This underscores the potential of an economy based on the care of the most vulnerable, each other and the earth.

The church bodies called on all of us to be nurturing communities:

Loving, caring and connectedness are key elements for resilience in the face of COVID-19. Physical distancing has needed to be counterbalanced by familial and social solidarity. As we nurture community, it is possible that new models and values for our economies could flourish rooted not in competition but in care for each other and the earth; that new conceptions of family beyond the restrictions of patriarchy and kinship relations and led by the visions of the most vulnerable would form the foundation of our communities; that borders would fall, racism be dismantled, and xenoph-

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BUILD BACK BETTER

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bia be replaced by radical hospitality.

They called on churches and church members to play a prophetic role at this time, seeking to transform systems:

COVID-19 is overshadowing many with fear, overturning their security and even undermining their faith. In this moment of crisis, we need a liberative theology coupled with a redemptive economy. The human causes and systemic roots of this pandemic point to the exigency of systemic change if we are to be converted by the revelation COVID-19 is of-

fering us, even as, like some latter-day Shepherd David, it brings some of those giant systems to their knees. We must build back better, to ensure an Economy of Life that is founded on justice and dignity for all.

This is a prophetic moment. As churches, we can see here a path towards the new creation. This struggle could bear the fruit of the earth's redemption from wanton exploitation. This is eschatological hope rooted not in the end of days, but in the fall of sinful systems. All shall be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51) if the truth is told, the old idolatries of empire

and economy cast down, and the care of the Creator reflected in a creation not exploited endlessly but blessed deeply.

The JIM Cluster will work with you to seek to implement this bold and loving vision. There will be others that will seek a bleak path from which they can profit. The gloomy alternative way would involve governments slashing services and reducing taxes, with voices in the media owned and controlled by billionaires already making such calls. We must resist the bleak vision and put forward the prophetic vision that reflects God's love for all humanity and the planet. •

REFUGEES TRANSFERRED FROM PNG TO THE USA

The Uniting Church in Australia has campaigned for a long time to see refugees that have been left in Papua New Guinea and Nauru transferred to Australia or another country for permanent settlement.

We invited you to write letters on the issue in 2011, and it has been one of the calls of the annual Palm Sunday rallies.

In good news, despite the closing the borders due to the COVID-19 crisis, it was reported in the media in late May that 35 of refugees in PNG were transferred to the USA for permanent resettlement. The transfer was part

of the deal between the Australian and US Governments. One refugee was flown to Finland. Refugees were also transferred from Brisbane and Melbourne to the US for permanent resettlement.

Several refugees in Port Moresby celebrated their imminent resettlement in the US with Fr Giorgio Licini, the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands.

Fr Licini told SBS News, "They were relaxed but had mixed feelings, especially that there are still some left behind, many are those who were never given refugee status and could not go home."

In March 2020, the Department of Home Affairs told a Senate Commit-

tee that 702 refugees had been resettled to the US under the deal with the US Government. The agreement allowed for up to 1,250 refugees to be relocated to the US. At that time, a further 260 had been approved for resettlement to the US and were awaiting transfer.

As of March 2020, there were still 211 refugees and people seeking asylum on Nauru, 228 in PNG and around 1,220 in Australia who had been transferred to Australia to receive medical treatment.

Thanks to everyone who has been part of the campaign to seek permanent resettlement for the refugees who had been transferred to PNG and Nauru after trying to reach Australia by boat. •

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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

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SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE ON TEMPORARY VISAS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In March 2020 we issued an urgent letter-writing action that requested you write to the Commonwealth Government seeking that income support and access to Medicare be extended to people on temporary visas stuck in Australia, including people who had applied for asylum.

In late May the Department of Social Services wrote stating the position of the Commonwealth Government was that the social security system was designed primarily to support Australian citizens and permanent residents. Therefore, the Commonwealth Government would not be extending JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments to people on temporary visas. However, the Department stated that some people on temporary visas were eligible to receive Special Benefit and the Coronavirus Supplement payments if they are in hardship. This includes people on temporary humanitarian visas, including Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs). The Department stated that people on TPVs and SHEVs can also access Medicare. People who have applied for a permanent visa, such as a permanent protection visa, may

also be eligible for Medicare while their visa application is determined.

The Department stated that people on temporary visas with work rights could also access any superannuation they had accumulated while working in Australia.

They also stated that the Commonwealth Government had provided \$37 million for emergency relief to people in hardship at this time, which included people on temporary visas. Emergency relief can consist of food, help to pay everyday bills, transport and school supplies.

Despite the assurances from the Department, there are many people on temporary visas experiencing significant hardship at this time, especially if they have lost their paid employment.

The Commonwealth Government called on all people on temporary visas to return to their countries of origin. However, the reality was that many countries had closed their borders, even to their own citizens. Further, international flights were minimal, so it was challenging for people to leave Australia.

Meanwhile, State Governments provided some assistance to people on temporary visas. The Governments of Victoria, Tasmania, NSW, South Australia, the ACT all provided some support to people on temporary visas. The Victorian Government provided up to \$1,100 to interna-

tional students who could show they have lost income as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The Tasmanian Government allocated \$3 million to provide support to people on temporary visas. Temporary visa holders in financial hardship were able to access \$250 for an individual and \$1,000 for a family.

On making the announcement to support people on temporary visas in Tasmania, the Tasmanian Premier, Peter Gutwein stated:

We understand there are a significant number of temporary visa holders in Tasmania who have lost their jobs due to the restrictions in place to protect Tasmanians, and we know they are experiencing hardship and income loss as a result.

We have an estimated 26,000 temporary visa holders in Tasmania including students, fruit pickers and skilled workers such as chefs and health workers. In some cases, due to business closures and the restrictions we have in place, their incomes have now been stopped or have been severely curtailed.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the Commonwealth Government requesting income support and access to Medicare for people on temporary visas. •

ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH UNDER THREAT FROM COVID-19

In April 2018 we requested that you write to the Australian Government to continue to provide humanitarian support to the 700,000 ethnic Rohingya refugees that had been forced to flee Myanmar and were living in Bangladesh. The Rohingya were forced to flee massacres carried out by the Myanmar military that claimed at least 10,000 lives.

In bad news, one of the Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh died from COVID-19 in 31 May. Cox's Bazar is home to nearly a million Rohingya refugees at this time. Physical distancing in the camp, to stop the spread of the

virus, is very difficult. Dozens of refugees will share the same hand-pump for access to water. The Government of Bangladesh has imposed bans on internet and mobile phone access in the camp, making it very difficult to spread public health messages in the camp. There are no intensive care beds in the camp. The Government of Bangladesh has imposed a lockdown in the camp to try and stop the spread of the virus. The lockdown has forced aid and development organisations to reduce their presence in the camp by 80%. As of the start of June, 15,000 of the refugees had been placed in quarantine.

As of the start of June, there were over 60,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bangladesh and 700 confirmed deaths. The government imposed a nationwide lockdown on 26 March to try and stem the spread

of the virus.

Also, there were hundreds of Rohingya that had attempted to leave Bangladesh on boats and became stranded at sea. The Government of Bangladesh rescued around 300 of them but placed them on a flood-prone island. The UN Secretary-General called for them to be moved back to the refugee camp at Cox's Bazar. Hundreds more remained stranded at sea as the governments of Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia had closed their borders in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The refugees had been stuck at sea for weeks, and many had already died.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in 2018 about the need for the Australian Government to continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. •

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS MOVE TO ADDRESS FAMILY VIOLENCE IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In the May 2020 JustAct, we requested that you write to the Commonwealth Government regarding measures to help prevent family violence against people on temporary visas.

The action was in the context that the lockdown in response to the COVID-19 crisis was likely to have increased the prevalence of family violence.

The Moderator, Rev Denise Liersch, also wrote to the Commonwealth, Victorian and Tasmanian Governments on the issue. The Tasmanian Minister for Women, the Hon Sarah Courtney, replied to inform us:

Following the Women's Safety Ministers meeting held in November 2019, I wrote to Senator Marise Payne outlining the specific barriers faced by women on temporary visas experiencing domestic and family violence. This is a complex issue that requires the collaboration of all levels of government to ensure the safety of women on temporary visas.

Over the coming months, officials from relevant areas of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments will meet to discuss options to better support women on temporary visas. Following this, the newly established Council of Australian Government's Women's Safety Council will be updated on work underway and the intended actions of all levels of government.

On 8 May, Victoria Police reported

on Operation Ribbon. Operation Ribbon commenced on 13 April 2020 to prevent the anticipated increase in family violence incidents as people stayed home with limited opportunities to access support. As of 8 May, police had conducted 2,433 checks on people suspected to be in danger of family violence. During the checks, police detected 780 family violence offences, including breaches of intervention orders and assaults. One hundred people were charged with family violence and other criminal offences. A further 98 people were arrested to appear in court.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of reforms to curb family violence against people on temporary visas. •

VIC GOVERNMENT REFORMS TO THE CODE COVERING POKIE VENUES TO REDUCE GAMBLING-RELATED HARM

In February 2019, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government to reform the Code of Conduct that requires pokie venues to implement measures to reduce the harm caused by pokies. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to this action.

On 21 February 2020, the Victorian Minister for Consumer Affairs, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Marlene Kairouz, announced a new Code of Conduct for pokie venues. The new Code has several positive reforms but was short of what we have been asking for to reduce the harm caused by pokie businesses. Among the things that the Code requires pokie businesses to do or prohibits them from doing are:

- A pokie business must not induce a person to enter or remain in the pokies area of a pub or club;
- A pokie business must not provide inducements to gambling on the pokies, other than offering a loyalty scheme;
- A pokie business must discourage intensive or prolonged gambling on the pokies;
- A pokie business must not induce a person to withdraw cash;
- Staff in a pokie venue are required to interact with a person who has been observed gambling on pokies for a prolonged period without a break. The staff are required to ask the person to take a break away from the pokies area of the pub or club;
- A dedicated staff member must monitor people gambling in the pub or club and provide assistance where they observe a person being harmed by their gambling;
- The owner of a pokie business must ensure that their staff do not gamble on the pokies in the pub or club in which they work on any day they are rostered to work in the venue. The requirement is in recognition that people who work in pokie venues are at increased risk of harm from gambling on pokies; and
- A pokie business must ensure that a person can order food and drinks in the pub or club without having to go into the area with pokies.

In May 2020, the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation released the latest research into the impacts of gambling in Victoria. The study shows that further reforms will be needed to further drive down the harm that gambling corporations inflict on our community. The research found a very small decrease in the

number of Victorians that had gambled in the last year, from 70% in 2014 to 69% in 2019. Participation was highest among people aged 65-74 years old (78% participation), and lowest among adults aged 18-24 years old (52% participation). Of the people who gambled, 20% gambled on pokies. Of people who have a problem with their gambling, 69% gambled on the pokies.

Only 8.3% of people who gambled placed bets with sports betting corporations. Men were far more likely to gamble with sports betting corporations (14% of men who gambled) than women (3% of women who gambled). However, 32% of men aged 18-24 years-old who gamble, gamble through sports betting corporations.

Of Victorians who gamble, 330,000 (9.6% of people who gamble) experienced harm as a result of their gambling. Pokies account for 38% of the harm. A further 300,000 Victorians suffer harm as a result of someone else's gambling.

The portion of Victorian adults who have problems with their gambling was 0.7% of Victorian adults. Of these people, 39% were in high distress, compared to 5% of all Victorian adults. •

CORONER'S FINDINGS IN TANYA DAY DEATH IN CUSTODY

In April 2019 we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government following the death in custody of First People woman Tanya Day in Castlemaine.

Tanya was removed from a V-line train for being intoxicated and transferred to the holding cells at the Castlemaine police station. In the cells, she fell multiple times and hit her head. She subsequently died from her injuries.

In early April 2020, the coroner investigating Tanya's death handed down her findings. The coroner ruled that Tanya's death had been preventable. The coroner found that

the checks on Tanya made by Leading Senior Constable Danny Wolters, which were overseen by Senior Sergeant Edwina Neale, were illusory and cursory. The coroner ruled the checks on Tanya while she was in the cell failed to meet Victoria Police guidelines. The coroner concluded that the police treatment of Tanya was not "causative of her death", but the death had been preventable had she not been arrested and taken into custody. The coroner referred the police officers involved at Castlemaine police station to the Director of Public Prosecution for investigation if they had committed an offence.

The coroner called on the Victorian Government to abolish the offence of

public drunkenness. She also recommended more training for Victorian police officers and V/line staff. She further recommended that falls risk assessment be added to the Victoria Police manual.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to the Victorian Government on Tanya's case and requesting that the offence of public drunkenness be abolished. The Victorian Government had earlier announced they would abolish the offence of public drunkenness once they have been able to establish an alternative system for dealing with people who become intoxicated and become a danger to themselves or others. •

VICTORIAN REGULATIONS FOR DISABILITY WORKERS TO COME INTO EFFECT IN JULY

In August 2016, September 2018 and April 2019, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government urging reforms to protect people with disabilities from abuse and neglect by people employed to care for them.

In good news, the Victorian Government will implement a code of conduct and offences to cover people who provide support to people with disabilities. The code of conduct and the offences will come into force on 1 July 2020. The Victorian Government invited submissions on the code of conduct and the offences and the Synod provided a submission to the consultation.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the Victorian Government in support of safeguards to protect people with disabilities. •



MINISTRY TO SEASONAL WORKERS IN NORTH EAST VICTORIA

REV LONI VAITOHI

The ministry to the Seasonal Workers from the Pacific Islands in the North East of Victoria began in 2015. It started with the occasional worship service at the Merrigum Town Hall and have now moved to the Merrigum Caravan Park where a small chapel has been furnished for worship.

Attendance at these services can range between twenty and a hundred, depending on the number of migrants who comes on the Seasonal Workers program. Most of the workers come on a six to nine months visa and most, if not all, sees worship as an integral part of their communal and spiritual welfare.

Being far from home and family, these services provided the migrant workers with space and opportunity to meet, pray together, share their stories, their hopes and expectations, and listen to the Word of God. They get to know each other and support one another.

The migrant workers come from different villages, different islands, even different religious denominations to form a congregation where all are welcomed regardless of social and religious affiliations.

The Uniting Church has been very supportive of the migrant workers by advocating for fair work condition (National Assembly and Synod), supplying for some of their needs, and offering pastoral work through the local congregation (Shepparton Uniting Church and Shepparton Rural Congregations).

The impact of this ministry to the migrant workers is difficult to gauge but there are inspiring stories coming out of the Islands about these people who are being transformed into responsible members of the community in the respective villages, their homes and their churches.

Here is one of those stories (used with permission)

A young mother of three girls, has been a victim of an abusive and violent relationship. She often had to beg the neighbours in the Pacific if she could come and clean their house and yard in exchange for food and diapers for her kids. She was given the chance to come to Aus-



tralia as part of the Seasonal Worker Program.

She did not know what to expect. She believed that time away from her abusive husband might just save her life, and she might be able to provide for her family.

When she arrived in Australia, to her surprise, she found support from both the local community and the church. She was able to worship without the burden of shame and guilt that accompanies abuse in a patriarchal society, and the judgemental stare of the locals.

She not only found faith here in Australia but also courage to make decisions regarding the future of her family.

In her own words:

"I am so thankful to those whom I have come into contact with, here in Australia. I am going to take back home more than just the money that I came here for in the first place. It's like being born again! I shall remember you all in my prayers. Thank you!"

There are many more inspiring stories of those who have been to the North East of Victoria in the Seasonal Workers Program. Their untold stories are being lived out in their homes and villages in the islands. •



'HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST'

REVIEW BY REV SWEE ANN KOH

Before Christmas, my colleague Mark Zirnsak gave me Ibram X. Kendi's latest book, 'How to be an Antiracist'. I started reading it a few days after and couldn't put it down until I finished.

I have learned so much from the book even though the context he is writing for is American.

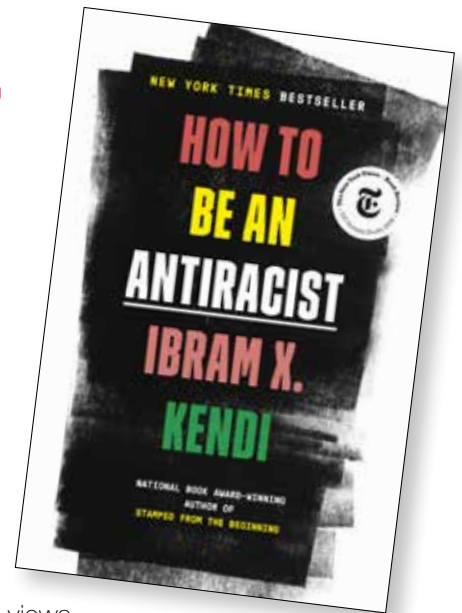
I was approached to write a 500 word review of the book which, to be honest, is a difficult task because there are so much in the book. The text itself is divided into an introduction, and 18 chapters covering a multitude of micro, mezzo, and macro considerations. Definitions continue in each section, giving meaning to the concepts of power, biology, ethnicity, body, culture, behaviour, colour, class, gender, and sexuality, to name a few.

'How to Be an Antiracist' is a combination academic treatise and memoir in which the author, Ibram Kendi, considers the different forms of racism in society and how we can best eliminate them, while also sharing his personal experiences with racism. Kendi is remarkably candid

and self-critical. "How," he asks, "can antiracists ask racists to open their minds and change when we are closed-minded and unwilling to change? I ignored my own hypocrisy, as people customarily do when it means giving up what they hold dear. Giving up my conception of racism meant giving up my view of the world and myself."

This is a dogmatic book, but that should be no surprise given the title takes the form of a "How To". Kendi gets away with the instructional tone, both because of the work he has put in, and because of his ability to face up to his own flaws.

Kendi, like any good academic, is clear about his terms and definitions. He believes that a racist is someone who supports "a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea," while an antiracist is one who supports "an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea." Most of us, he concludes, hold both racist and antiracist views. But our beliefs are not necessarily fixed and immutable. "'Racist' and 'antiracist' are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing ... in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos." In other words, our



views

and positions can change – as the evolution of his own thinking demonstrates.

One of the challenges that Kendi poses to his readers is to address our deeply ingrained tendencies to default to racist ideas and this requires "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination." This won't be easy because many of us would rather avoid these often-difficult discussions.

How to Be an Antiracist is a thought-provoking and insightful book even though it makes me uncomfortable. Kendi convinced me that it's not enough for me to say that I am not racist. I must be antiracist. And to this task I will commit myself. I highly recommend this book. •

UPDATE ON THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The April 2018 JustAct invited you to write letters to the Commonwealth Government seeking reforms to the Community Development Program (CDP).

The CDP is targeted towards job seekers, both First Peoples and non-Indigenous, living in remote regions and who are in receipt of Newstart Allowance, Parenting Payment or Youth Allowance benefits. The CDP has resulted in discrimination

against and exploitation of many First People who have been locked out of the normal job market.

The Commonwealth Government introduced some reforms to the program in March 2019, which allowed greater flexibility and more local discretion to make it easier for people to engage with the CDP. In the first six months after the reforms were introduced, the number of penalties issued against people on the program halved. Penalties have been issued against people seeking work for failing to meet the demands of the pro-

gram. The requirements of the CDP were more significant than for other people seeking work elsewhere in Australia, resulting in much higher rates of penalties being imposed on First People who are seeking paid employment.

On 22 March 2020, the Commonwealth Government announced that all penalties in the CDP would be suspended in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters calling for reform of the CDP. •