

JUSTACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

AUGUST 2020



NERVOUS STATES THE INCREASE IN SOCIAL CONFLICT IN OUR TIME

The JIM Cluster have been exploring several trends emerging in our society and globally at the moment that impacts our ability to create a socially just world in recent editions of JustAct.

There is a decline in trust in the community, institutions (including churches) and democracy as a form of government. The decline in trust has helped fuel the election of populist leaders across the globe. Many of these leaders have further fuelled division within their communities and globally.

There is also a decline in empathy, with the online world created by multinational technology corporations feeding into that trend. The software behind many online search engines and social media platforms amplifies existing beliefs and prejudice, rather than promoting diversity and understanding.

William Davies, Professor in Political Economy at Goldsmiths, University of London, examines these themes and other concerning trends in his book 'Nervous States. How feelings took over the world'.

The book starts with two incidents of panic. One in the London Underground in 2017 and the other at New York's JFK airport in 2016. In both cases, there was mass panic out of fear of a terrorist attack, when no such attack was happening. In the case of the panic in the London Underground, nine people ended up in the hospital.

Davies argues that our move away from objective, slow and rational assessments is making our communities and our world less safe:

Events such as these typify something about the times in which we live when speed of reaction often takes precedence over slower and more cautious assessments. As we become more attuned to 'real-time' events and media, we inevitably end up placing more trust in sensation and emotion than in evidence. Knowledge becomes more valued for its speed and impact than for its cold objectivity, and emotive falsehood often travels faster than fact. In situations of physical danger, where time is of the essence, rapid reaction makes sense. But the influence of 'real-time' data now

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NERVOUS STATES — THE INCREASE IN SOCIAL CONFLICT IN OUR TIME

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extends well beyond matters of security. News, financial markets, friendships and work engage us in a constant flow of information, making it harder to stand back and construct a more reliable portrait of any of them. The threat lurking in this is that otherwise peaceful situations can come to feel dangerous until eventually they really are.

We have seen recent examples of this with situations of irrational panic buying in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Supermarket shelves were stripped of toilet paper. The people doing the panic buying artificially caused the shortage by overwhelming the supermarkets' distribution systems. The reality was there was no shortage of products like toilet paper to meet the need, but the distribution system was not set up to cope with people on mass buying months of supply in advance.

We saw graphic examples of panic buying leading to conflict between people shopping. Some people were willing to use physical violence to protect the goods they intended to buy in bulk. There was wide reporting of a stabbing of a Woolworths' staff member in the supermarket carpark in Rosebud in March.

Davies argues that from the mid-17th century, Western thinking created two fundamental binaries, between mind and body and between war and peace. He argues that both have been gradually eroded. On the erosion between war and peace, he explains:

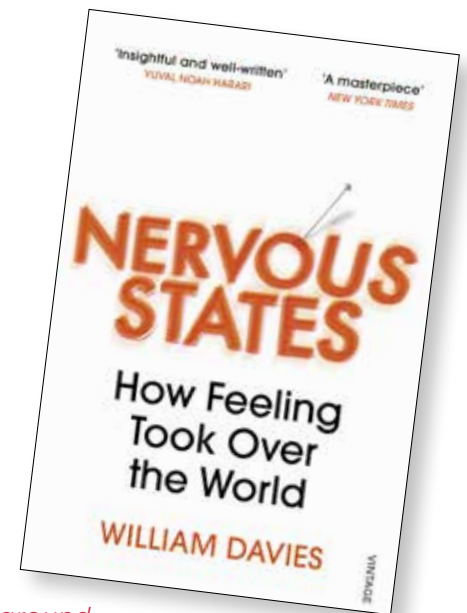
Meanwhile, new forms of violence have emerged, in which states are attacked by non-state groups, interstate conflicts are fought us-

ing non-military means (such as cyberwarfare), and the distinction between policing and military intervention becomes blurred. As society has been flooded by digital technology, it has grown harder to specify what belongs to the mind and what to the body, what is peaceful dialogue and what is conflict.

He argues that the Western Enlightenment promised to create peace and harmony in societies through identifying a rational and objective set of facts on which rulers or governments could make decisions for the well-being of the community. The birth of the notion of 'evidence-based' government policy. Of course, the reality never matched the promise. The emergence of the 'post-modernist' school of thought that argued there is no such thing as unbiased evidence placed the entire concept of evidence-based policy under attack.

Davies raises the question as to who is seeking to manipulate our feelings for their benefit:

The promise of expertise, first made in the seventeenth century, is to provide us with a version of reality that we can all agree on. The promise of digital computing, by contrast, is to maximise sensitivity to a changing environment. Timing becomes everything. Experts produce facts; Google and Twitter offer trends. As the objective view of the world recedes, it is replaced by intuition as to which way things are heading now. This nervous state offers more emotional stimulation and sensitivity, but for the same reason it is unsettling and disruptive of peaceful situations. In some circumstances, it can generate conflict and upheaval out of nothing. Meanwhile, the question lurks in the back-



ground of who might be seeking to trigger specific feelings and why.

As a church committed to peace-building and fostering a harmonious society and world, Uniting Church members have a vested interest in the trends that Professor Davies is exploring. We have a role to play in our communities to work for peace and well-being of all people. For that reason, the JIM Cluster is committed to examining social justice issues objectively and considering the perspectives of all those impacted. For us this means things like checking sources of information, and ensuring that the data is correct, and acknowledging perspectives that differ from our own. Of course, we then need to bring the values and perspective of the Christian faith to the situation. These principles guide the way the JIM Cluster provides you with information and invites you to work together for a better world for people and the natural environment.

Professor Davies' work also provides the case why it remains important that the Uniting Church seek appropriate regulation of the online world.

We will continue to explore the trends identified by Professor Davies in coming issues of JustAct. •

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

Mark Zimsak – Senior Social Justice Advocate
Denisse Sandoval – Social Justice Advocate
Tim Molineux – Social Justice Officer

Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Centre for Theology and Ministry
29 College Crescent
Parkville, Victoria 3052

Phone - (03) 9340 8807

jim@victas.uca.org.au
<http://www.justact.org.au>

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.

SUPERANNUATION FUNDS DIVEST FROM FOSSIL FUELS

In the May 2020 JustAct, we requested you write to the superannuation funds AustralianSuper, UniSuper, HESTA and Hostplus to ask that they no longer invest members' funds in fossil fuel businesses.

In good news, on 26 June, HESTA announced that it would reduce the carbon emissions of its investment portfolio by 44% by 2030 and be 'net zero' by 2050.

First State Super, although not a target for our letter-writing action, has also announced a commitment to divest by October 2020 from busi-

nesses that derive more than 10% of their revenue from thermal coal. The superannuation fund will also ensure a minimum 30% reduction in the emissions related to their listed equities investment portfolio by 2023.

By contrast, UniSuper wrote back to people who wrote to them stating that they have no plans to divest from coal corporations or other fossil fuel businesses. They argued it was up to members to decide if they wished to invest their funds in options that avoided the fossil fuel industry. At the same time, they reported that fossil fuel exposure was around 5% of their investment portfolio, with less than

2% invested in fossil fuel exploration and production. They said their exposure to thermal coal companies at around 0.3% of their investment portfolio.

Hostplus replied to people who wrote to them to argue they seek to influence the behaviour of fossil fuel companies by investing in them. The JIM Cluster doubts that such investments are likely to have the necessary impact on the behaviour of these companies at a time when there is an urgent need to transition away from the use of fossil fuels.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to the superannuation funds. •

FORTESCUE METALS LOSES NATIVE TITLE CASE

In February 2018, we asked that you support the Yindjibarndi people in the Pilbara, Western Australia, by writing to the Fortescue Metals Groups to drop their court case that was seeking to deny Native Title rights to the Yindjibarndi people. The Synod held shares in the Fortescue Metals Group.

In good news, the mining corporation exhausted all legal avenues and lost the case in late May 2020. The High Court rejected the application by the company, and Fortescue Metals has to pay the legal costs of the Yindjibarndi people.

With the loss of the appeal to the High Court by Fortescue Metals, the chief executive of the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation, Michael Woodley, said: "We can give the next generation some hope from this point forward."

It is expected that the roughly 800 traditional owners will now seek



compensation for the economic loss and spiritual harm the company has caused to the Yindjibarndi people. It was reported that Fortescue Metals destroyed hundreds of sacred and significant sites around the mine.

The Yindjibarndi people began their struggle with Fortescue Metals in 2003, when they lodged a formal Native Title claim and asked for a share in the mining royalties on their land. Fortescue Metals began operating their mine on the Yindjibarndi people's

land in 2008 without an agreement with the traditional owners. The mine has made the company an estimated \$20 billion since 2013.

Fortescue Metals had attempted to divide the local First People community by giving support to the break-away Wirlu-murra Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to the Fortescue Metals Group. •

FAMILY VIOLENCE INCREASES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

You were invited to write letters to the Commonwealth Government calling for reforms to address family violence experienced by women on temporary visas in Australia in the May JustAct. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to the action.

The good news is that on 3 July 2020, the Commonwealth Government announced an extra \$3 million in funding over two years for counselling and support services that support women and children who have been experiencing family violence. The funding will be provided to 23 existing service providers across every state and territory in Australia, with 93 locations nationwide.

The bad news was reported by

the Australian Institute of Criminology in a report they released in July 2020. The research found that in the three months to May 2020, 4.6% of Australian women surveyed reported experiencing physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner. Almost 6% of women experienced coercive control. A further 11.6% of women reported experiencing at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour.

For many women, the pandemic

coincided with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. Two-thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months before the survey.

Many women, particularly those experiencing more severe or complex forms of violence and abuse, reported safety concerns were a barrier to help-seeking. •

Coronavirus

IF YOU'RE ESCAPING HARM FROM FAMILY VIOLENCE YOU ARE ABLE TO LEAVE YOUR HOME – SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Contact safe steps 24/7 on **1800 015 188**
or safesteps@safesteps.org.au

VICTORIA | State Government

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE INCREASES DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

We have requested that you write letters in support of reforms to make the online world a safer place in November 2018, April 2019, June 2019 and June 2020.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 lockdown has increased the cases of online child sexual abuse. The Australian Federal Police reported that between July 2019 and May 2020 they had laid 1,078 charges related to online child sexual abuse against 144 alleged abusers. That compared to 74

people being charged with 372 online child sexual abuse offences in the 2018-2019 financial year.

Between 9 March and 1 June 2020, police arrested 49 people. They laid 226 charges relating to the distribution of child sexual abuse material online. It represents a 127% increase over the same period in 2019. Of those arrested, eight were in Victoria and one in Tasmania.

In April 2020, a joint operation between Australian and US police resulted in rescuing four Australian children from on-going sexual abuse. Police arrested 16 Australian abusers

involved in selling and buying child sexual abuse material online on 738 charges.

The Australian Federal Police said that Australians are in the top three countries of places where those demanding live child sexual abuse via webcam reside. The principal place the victims live is in the Philippines. The abuser makes payment online to have the child abused, and they view it live via a webcam.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of reforms to address online child sexual abuse. •



ONLINE GAMBLING HARM INCREASES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

REGULATOR MOVES TO BLOCK MORE ONLINE GAMBLING SITES

In our last JustAct mailing, we included a postcard asking the Commonwealth Government to end advertising by online gambling corporations.

The COVID-19 lockdown has seen an increase in on-line gambling harm. If you did not get a chance to post off the postcard, it is not too late to do so. If you would like more cards to invite others in your household also to send off cards, please let us know by contacting Mark Zimsak at mark.zimsak@victas.uca.org.au.

Research by the Australian Institute of Criminology found that in April 2020 one third of people gambling on-line reported spending more than they had at the start of the year. While fewer people were gambling online, those that continued to do so were on average spending more. Most of those spending more were men aged under 40 living with a partner and children. The National Australia Bank reported a 20% surge in online gambling spending in March 2020.

Data from Illion Alphabeta from the week beginning 21 June, showed a 64% rise in online gambling losses. Data from the National Australia Bank from June showed a

105% increase in online gambling losses.

Online gambling corporation, Ladbrokes, reported in June that its Australian online gambling revenue had increased by 76%.

In a positive move, the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) has used its powers to require Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block access to another 11 offshore online gambling websites that have been illegally accepting bets from Australians. Since ACMA was given the power to require ISPs to block online gambling sites in November 2019, it has required ISPs to block access to 66 gambling websites that were illegally accepting bets from Australians. More than 100 online gambling companies based offshore have stopped taking bets from Australians.

Under the *Interactive Gambling Act 2001*, it is illegal for an offshore online gambling company to accept bets from Australians.

Thank you to those who have sent off the postcards. •

ALCOHOL HEALTH WARNING LABELS APPROVED



In the last JustAct mailing we included a letter-writing action asking you to write to the Victorian Government in support of the placement of a health warning label of alcohol containers that women

should not consume alcohol while pregnant.

The consumption of alcohol while pregnant can lead to the child having Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). FASD is a severe, preventable, life-long disability.

In great news, a majority of State and Territory Governments voted in

favour of the new label at the meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation on 17 July 2020. The decision means the new standard will apply across Australia and New Zealand. Both the Victorian and Tasmanian Governments voted in favour of the warning label.

Nearly 4,000 people wrote to the Ministers making the decision. The Ministers were also urged to back the warning label by more than 180 churches, community, health, medical and research organisations.

The label will be the strongest warning label on FASD in the world at the moment.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters on this action. •

NATIONAL DISABILITY INSURANCE SCHEME TO GET IMPROVED SAFEGUARDS

There was good news that on 12 June 2020 the Commonwealth Government introduced a Bill to the Parliament to provide more significant safeguards for people with disabilities from abuse, neglect and mistreatment.

The *National Disability Insurance Scheme (Strengthening Banning Orders) Bill* strengthens the existing powers of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Quality and Safeguards Commissioner to ban a worker or service provider from delivering services under the NDIS. The Minister for the NDIS, Stuart Roberts, told the Parliament that the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commissioner had found the existing powers they had to ban people and service providers from the NDIS were too narrow. If the Bill becomes law, the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Com-

missioner will be able to draw on the history of a person working in child care or aged care to ban them if they had engaged in abuse and neglect in those sectors.

We had previously requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to provide greater safeguards for people with disabilities from abuse and neglect in August 2016, August 2018, November 2018 and April 2019.

The Bill was introduced, in part, as a response to the death of Adelaide woman Ann Marie Smith, aged 54. Ms Smith, who had cerebral palsy, died of profound septic shock and multiple organ failure on 6 April 2020. She had also been suffering from malnutrition, rotting flesh and pressure sores. Police believe she may have been sitting in a cane chair for up to a year before her death. The chair acted as her toilet. Investigators could not find any nutritional food in the house.

Ms Smith had NDIS funding for six hours of care a day, seven days a week. Ms Smith's carer was sacked from the agency she worked for, Integrity Care SA, on 17 May 2020. Her carer was charged with manslaughter on 6 August 2020.

In recent years, Ms Smith had been unable to feed and bathe herself. She could no longer use a wheelchair.

The NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission has fined Integrity Care SA \$12,600 for failing to report Ms Smith's death within the required 24 hours.

Police are investigating the disappearance of two fridges and \$35,000 worth of jewellery from her home.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of the campaign to try and ensure that people with disabilities are treated with respect. •

CARING FOR THE EARTH ONE MASK AT A TIME

**ANDREA MAYES, DEACON
CANDIDATE PORT PHILLIP EAST**

I sew fabric face masks because I care for people and the environment. The masks go to a local ecumenical charity and are distributed along with food to people in need in my suburb.

If 50 reusable masks are each worn for a month, then 1,500 disposable masks do not need to be manufactured or disposed of. Resulting in less resources extracted from the earth.

There is debate within the environmental movement about the importance of individual actions to care for the earth when compared to collective action calling for systemic change. There is concern that if people feel they are doing their bit for the planet with actions such as recycling, they will not make the time or effort to engage with further collective action. Therefore, these individual actions can be seen as tokenistic or act as distractions to the larger changes that have to be made. Despite these concerns, I believe that concrete individual actions are an essential part of a life committed to caring for the environment.

It is through concrete individual ac-



tions that we demonstrate our commitment to caring for God's creation. When we do what we can as an individual, we can then authentically call for the government and others to change and care for the earth. Our individual practical actions are a foundation for our collective and social justice oriented actions.

The concrete individual action also become part of our witness as other people see what we are doing and ask why we are doing it. We can then explain to people how our faith leads us to care for the environment. That

we believe God cares deeply about the earth and wants us to take care of it.

The last reason it is so important for us to do individual concrete actions is that it helps with our mental health and ability to persevere in caring for the earth. As we learn more about the many environmental problems that face us, including climate change and the extinction of species, we can feel anxious, despair, anger and sadness. While we need to acknowledge our feelings, many people have found that taking action helps manage these feelings. In our individual actions we have control over what we do and can feel a sense of achievement. These small achievements can then sustain us when we are involved in collective action that is slow in producing change, such as stopping the Adani coal mine.

So, let's celebrate the many practical actions we are taking to care for the earth and take time to share with each other what we are doing. Let's see these actions as part of our everyday discipleship, showing our love for our Earth neighbour •



PRAYER IN SOLIDARITY WITH THOSE WHO SUFFER

BY MARY KAY MCVEY

It can be overwhelming when we see the amount of suffering by people throughout the world. Let us prayerfully reflect upon those who are in pain in our communities and in our world. May we find grace and strength to walk with them in their pain and to lessen their affliction when we are able.

READER 1: (Matthew 9:35-36)

Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.

Silent Reflection

Let us take a moment in silent reflection, considering the reading we have heard.

READER 2: (Dorothy Day, Amer-

ican journalist and Roman Catholic reformer, cofounder of the *Catholic Worker newspaper*)

Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other's faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.

For all who suffer from contagious disease and terminal illness.

ALL: (from Psalm 80) Lord, let your face shine forth, and we shall be saved.

For those whose lives are threatened by lack of clean water and sustainable crops.

ALL: Lord, let your face shine forth, and we shall be saved.

For all who live in fear, oppression and the threat of violence.

ALL: Lord, let your face shine forth, and we shall be saved.

For all people trapped in poverty, the unemployed and those who have lost hope.

ALL: Lord, let your face shine forth, and we shall be saved.

ALL: Loving God, May we see the plight of all those who suffer in our midst. Give us courage and compassion to live in solidarity with the suffering. May our hearts, burning with love, bear the burdens of all in our care. And may our loving example ignite the hearts of others to accompany the vulnerable in their affliction. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. •

GOVERNMENT INTRODUCES DIRECTOR IDENTIFICATION NUMBER

In July 2017 we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking for several reforms to address harms that corporations have been able to carry out, including wage theft, bribery, tax evasion, fraud and money laundering.

One of the measures we suggested was the introduction of a Director Identification Number. As the corporate registration system stood, it was very easy for those with criminal in-

tent to set up companies with front directors, to hide the real people running the company. In some cases, the people being used as front directors had their identities stolen, and they were registered as company directors without their knowledge. Fake directors have included James Bond, Elvis Presley and Homer Simpson.

The Commonwealth Parliament has passed a law introducing a Director Identification Number. The new law requires that the identity of a person must be verified before they can register as a company director. It will ensure that people must use their real

names, addresses and dates of birth when registering. It will also make it easy to find out how many companies a person is acting as a director of. The reform will make it easier to hold people to account for criminal corporate behaviour and deter such crimes from happening.

The system is likely to be implemented in the first half of 2021

Thank you to everyone who has supported the efforts to rein in corporate criminal behaviour and the harm it causes. •