

# JUSTACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

OCTOBER 2020

## “THEY CANNOT KILL OUR FAITH”

### MURDERS AND HARASSMENT OF CHURCH PEOPLE IN THE PHILIPPINES



**Rev Joel Bengbeng is the superintendent of the United Methodist Church in a town in the northwest Philippines. On 4 March 2020, soldiers visited Rev Bengbeng at his church.**

They accused him of being connected to the armed communist movement, the New People's Army (NPA). The soldiers urged him to sign a document confessing he was a member of the NPA.

“I regard this intimidation as an attack not only against me but the United Methodist Church as well. It is meant to silence the prophetic voice of the church, to distract us from discharging our sacred duty to uphold justice, especially in these trying times”, said Rev Bengbeng.

“I fear for my life. I persist not to go out by myself. I seek help from a relative to accompany me or drive for me.”

Rev Bengbeng said he suspected that the intimidation might be due to his participation in a movement opposing the construction of a dam in his area. The dam project threatened to displace families from their homes.

The JIM Cluster has worked with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, South Luzon Jurisdictional Area to produce a report to document murders, attempted murders, death threats and harassment of church people in the Philippines under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte.

There is a letter-writing action based on the report in this JustAct.

The report finds that no one in the churches is safe if they are engaged in social justice advocacy in the Philippines. Those targeted have included senior bishops, priests, ministers, pastors and lay members of the churches. The victims have come from the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), the Roman Catholic Church, the Iglesia Filipino Independiente (IFI) church, the United Methodist Church and ecumenical bodies including the National Council of Churches in the Philippines.

The Uniting Church in Australia has a formal partnership with the UCCP.

Murders of church people have occurred in the context of

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the Duterte Administration's 'drug war', which has seen thousands of extrajudicial executions. President Duterte promised during his election campaign to orchestrate the mass extrajudicial killing of people involved in the drug trade. Extrajudicial killings are where police, soldiers or hired death squads murder people without the need for any evidence of having done anything wrong or judicial oversight. The vic-

and 2020. The majority of the victims were involved with the social justice mission of the Christian faith.

The report documents death threats and harassment of 29 church people. These included bishops, ministers, priests, the spouses and children of ministers, lay church workers and ordinary church members.

Typical forms of harassment in-



NPA can lead to a person being murdered.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines stated in June 2020 concerning the murder, harassment and intimidation of church people:

*Most of the church people targeted in this way are those primarily fulfilling the Christian mandate and mission of ministering to the poor and the marginalised. They undertake their prophetic task as Christians to be with the people, especially in times when the basic human rights of people and communities are being undermined. Their Christian mandate compels them to be with the last of the least and with the poorest of the poor to defend God's image in every human being. Their faith compels them to accompany people in asserting and attaining their full rights, but they are vilified, harassed and even killed for doing so.*

The JIM Cluster will continue to invite you to be part of our ecumenical efforts to end the extrajudicial killings and harassment of church people, human rights defenders and environmentalists in the Philippines.

The Synod is providing \$15,000 per year for three years from bequests earmarked for international mission to assist the UCCP in human rights training for their members. •

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**THE MAJORITY OF THE VICTIMS WERE INVOLVED WITH THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MISSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**  
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tims of the 'drug war' have often been people from impoverished backgrounds who used drugs, but also people with no connection at all to illicit drugs.

President Duterte has made many public comments that have encouraged members of the police and the military to engage in egregious human rights abuses. He has promised to protect them from the judicial system.

Those responsible for the murders of church people, human rights defenders, environmentalists, and social justice advocates are very rarely held to account.

The report presents the cases of 16 church members, ministers and priests murdered between 2017

volve the filing of baseless, serious criminal charges against the targeted person. The charges usually accuse the target of being a member of the NPA and involved in the murder or attempted murder of members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Another common form of harassment is to label or 'tag' the person as a member or supporter of the NPA. The tagging places the target at further risk of harassment or extrajudicial execution because President Duterte has declared that the Communist Party of the Philippines and the NPA to be "terrorist entities". The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also reported in June 2020 that being tagged a member or supporter of the

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

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# UPDATE ON FAMILY VIOLENCE AND PEOPLE ON TEMPORARY VISAS

**In May 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government seeking reforms to protect better and support people on temporary visas that experience family violence.**

On 7 August 2020, government Ministers from across the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments who have responsibility for women's safety met. Their statement from the meeting includ-

ed that women on temporary visas experiencing violence "remains a priority for all governments who will work together to explore data on the extent of and responses to the issue.

Also, in April 2017 the then Synod Moderator wrote to the then Commonwealth Minister for Women asking for several reforms to address family violence better. One of those was that the Family Law Act 1975 be amended so that a breach of an injunction for personal protection is a criminal offence. The Synod meeting in 2017 also passed a res-

olution in support of the reform.

The governments across Australia have now committed to introducing the reform. The Commonwealth Government has stated that it is working with State and Territory police and court officials through the National Personal Protection Injunction Working Group to determine how these offences could be enforced by state and territory police.

Thank you to everyone who has written letters in support of reforms to protect people from family violence and to support survivors. •

## SEASONAL WORKERS FROM THE PACIFIC START TO RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

**We have requested in November 2018 and August 2020 that you write letters in support of the Seasonal Worker Program, provided it has adequate safeguards against exploitation.**

The Seasonal Worker Program brings workers from the Pacific and Timor Leste to work on Australian farms for up to nine months at a time. In most cases, the workers are able to take home with them enough money to make a real difference to the lives of their families and communities back in Pacific.

The Program was suspended in March 2020 due to COVID-19. That meant new workers could not come to Australia from the Pacific. However, thousands of workers from the Pacific in Australia were unable to return home due to Pacific Governments closing the borders to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks in the Pacific.

Churches across Australia stepped



in to provide support to the stranded workers where such help was needed.

On 21 August, the Australian Government announced the Program would start again for any Pacific Island Governments willing to participate. So far 160 workers from Vanuatu have arrived in Australia to pick mangoes in the Northern Territory. The Pacific countries that have signed up to send workers to Australia at the time of writing are Vanuatu, Timor Leste, Fiji,

Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa.

At the same time, workers stranded in Australia have been allowed to return home in numbers that will enable the Pacific Governments to manage quarantine arrangements.

The JIM Cluster will continue to advocate that the Australian Government should give preference to workers from the Pacific to work on Australian farms to help address poverty in the Pacific. •

# ON THE ROAD TO A RENEWABLE ENERGY FUTURE



**Many of you have used the resources we have generated to take actions in support of Australia increasing its use of renewable energy to help address our contribution to climate change.**

In good news, the Australian Energy Market Operator released a plan mapping a path that would see 94% of Australia's electricity generated from renewable sources by 2040. Around two-thirds of Australia's coal-fired power stations are expected to close by 2040.

Australia's share of electricity generated from renewable sources increased to 25% in 2020, up from 21% in 2019. The Commonwealth Government acknowledges that Australia will reach 50% of its electricity being generated from renewable sources by 2030. Large-scale solar power generation grew by 135% in 2019. The use of renewable power generation to supply electricity has increased by 54% since 2015.

Tasmania produced 94% of its

electricity from hydropower in 2019. Victoria made 21% of its electricity from renewable sources in 2019.

Solar power panels are now installed on over 2.5 million Australian homes, compared to 100,000 homes a decade ago. It is estimated that around 30% of homes suitable for solar panels now have them installed. The combined installed capacity of rooftop solar electricity generation in Australia is nearly 12,000 MW.

On 2 September 2020, the Victorian Government announced it would seek to add a further 600 MW of renewable power generation into the Victorian grid. That would be enough electricity to supply every hospital and school in Victoria, as well as Melbourne's train network. Under the plan, the Victorian Government would buy power from project developers at a fixed price, giving them revenue certainty to secure loans and proceed with renewable energy projects.

The Victorian Government aims to reach 25% of its electricity generation from renewable energy by the end of 2020. In the 2019-2020 fi-

nancial year, coal generation of electricity fell by more than 1,000 MW.

The contribution coal-fired power stations are making to electricity generation in Australia is now at its lowest level since the National Energy market was established in 1998.

In September, the Chinese Government announced it would aim for net-zero emissions by 2060. However, the announcement did not contain much detail on how that goal would be achieved. The next five-year plan of the Chinese Government will be crucial to see if the commitment is meaningful. China is responsible for 28% of global greenhouse gas emissions at the moment. Coal consumption in China had decreased between 2013 and 2017 but then began to increase again. The Chinese Government granted more construction permits for coal-fired power stations in the first six months of 2020 than it had each year in 2018 and 2019. At the same time, China is the world's largest manufacturer of electric cars and buses. China also accounts for 30% of all renewable energy gener-

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# ON THE ROAD TO A RENEWABLE ENERGY FUTURE

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ated globally.

More than 60 countries so far have pledged to meet net-zero emissions by 2050.

Unfortunately, it is not all good news on addressing climate change. In early September the World Meteorological Organisation warned that the increase in average global temperature has a one in four chance of reaching 1.5oC by 2024. The Paris Agreement between governments aimed to limit the average global temperature increase to 1.5oC.

It is estimated the lockdowns due to the pandemic will reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by between 4% and 7% compared to 2019.

The Australian insurance industry commissioned a study with the US National Centre for Atmospheric Research and with input from the CSIRO and Australian Bureau of Meteorology to predict the likely impact of climate change on extreme weather events in Australia. The study found that Australia will experience less tropical cyclones. Still, those that form will be more intense

and move further inland. The report predicts cyclones in future will move as far south as north-east NSW.

The report found there would be increased severe flash floods on the east coast of Australia.

The Insurance Australia Group found that the summer bushfires were so destructive that they defied existing modelling.

We will continue to invite you to take actions that seek to ensure Australia plays a leading role in taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the harms caused by climate change. •

## FURTHER PROGRESS ON SUPER FUNDS MOVING AWAY FROM FOSSIL FUELS

**In May 2020, we requested that you write to four superannuation funds, AustralianSuper, Unisuper, HESTA and Hostplus, to ask that they stop investing in companies that are expanding fossil fuel operations or are on a business path that is incompatible with the greenhouse gas emission reductions that would be needed to achieve the Paris Agreement goals.**

In good news, on 15 September Unisuper announced that it was committed to having an investment portfolio with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It also committed to not investing in companies that make more than 10% of revenue from thermal coal. It also pledged to ensure all active, in-house Australian companies in its investment portfolio have made Paris Agreement aligned commitments by the end of 2021.

Unisuper also told fellow investors in Gelncore's Valeria thermal coal mine in Queensland that it wants the project shut down. It holds a 15% stake in the mine.

However, Unisuper indicated that they would continue to invest in companies involved in constructing natural gas pipelines.

In late September, HESTA wrote to the 200 largest listed companies in Australia asking that they lower



their greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Agreement for net-zero emissions by 2050. HESTA had previously committed to achieving net-zero emissions from its investments by 2050. HESTA has already started to divest from thermal coal companies.

In September 2020, the Monash University Sustainable Development Institute and ClimateWorks Australia released a report on the efforts Australian superannuation funds were undertaking to address climate change. The report found that AustralianSuper and Hostplus had made commitments that will reduce portfolio greenhouse gas emissions but were not in alignment with achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, or the alignment is unclear due to insufficient information.

AustralianSuper has committed to investing around \$1 billion in renewable energy generation. However, it remains a small shareholder in Whitehaven Coal, New Hope and South 32. These are companies involved in coal mining. In August 2020, AustralianSuper bought 75 million shares in Coronado Global Resources that owns the Curragh coal mine in Queensland.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the superannuation funds on the issue of climate change. •



## UPDATE ON THE MASS MURDER OF ROHINGYA IN MYANMAR

**In April 2018, we requested that you write to the Australian Government about continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to the 700,000 ethnic Rohingya who were forced to flee their homes due to the campaign of mass murder that was carried out by the Myanmar military.**

Two Myanmar soldiers in the custody of the International Criminal Court have provided video confessions of their involvement in the mass murders and rapes in early September 2020. The videos are yet to be independently verified.

Private Myo Win Tun of the Myanmar Army Light Infantry Battalion 565 and Private Zaw Naing Tun of Light Infantry Battalion 353 were part of “clearance operations” in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017. Between them, they confessed to taking part in the murders of at least 180 Rohingya children, women and men. The soldiers provided the names and ranks of 19 direct perpetrators from the Myanmar army, including themselves, as well as six officers whom they allege ordered

or contributed to the crimes against humanity inflicted on the Rohingya people.

The soldiers allege they were ordered to “exterminate all” Rohingya people, “shoot all that you see” and “kill all” Rohingya people in specific areas.

The Myanmar military has demanded the two soldiers be transferred back to Myanmar and claimed the alleged confessions were probably made under duress.

In a report issued early this year, the Independent Commission of Enquiry set up by the Myanmar Government said the army’s “clearance operations” in Rakhine State didn’t have “genocidal intent”, contradicting the findings of UN investigators. The Commission admitted that “war crimes, serious human rights violations, and violations of domestic law took place” against the Rohingya.

There has also been news of Facebook not assisting in the UN investigation into the campaign of mass murder carried out against the Rohingya. Nicholas Koumjian, head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar, told Reuters Facebook was holding material “highly relevant and probative of serious international crimes” but

had not shared any of the information during year-long talks.

Facebook has been trying to block efforts by the Government of Gambia in the US courts to force it to hand over posts and communications made by members of Myanmar’s military and police relevant to organising the mass murder. It has argued to the court that the information the Government of Gambia is seeking is “unduly intrusive and burdensome.”

Facebook did close the account of the commander-in-chief of the Myanmar military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and other military officials. While the mass murders and rapes took place in 2016 and 2017, Facebook only removed 484 pages and 157 accounts relating to inciting violence against the Rohingya in 2018.

Facebook’s actions to delay and frustrate the investigations into the mass murder of Rohingya in Myanmar provides yet another example of why we need strong laws to regulate multinational social media corporations to protect human rights. The JIM Cluster will continue to invite you to take actions in support of the regulation of these technology corporations. •

# LISTENING TO LAND IN A TIME OF CHANGE

**CHRIS DALTON — MEMBER OF MT ELIZA UNITING CHURCH AND THE SYNOD ETHICS COMMITTEE. THE FOLLOWING PIECE IS WRITTEN IN HIS OWN CAPACITY.**

**We worry about climate change, its impact on future generations, and the need to act now to protect God's precious creation.**

Our concerns are compounded when we put them within the context of other crises such as Covid-19, resource scarcity and economic recession.

Further, reaching 'a new normal' involves a migration from the familiar and safe to something uncertain and threatening.

Reflection on the concept of migration (diaspora) can help us prepare for this new world. As migrants, we are in a no-man's-land betwixt and between the past and the future, a world of intimacy and isolation, creativity and desolation, uncertainty and ambiguity. But the opportunity exists for us to be inquisitive explorers surveying new territory being revealed in the midst of upheaval.

And this is not a new experience for many of us. Many Australians have already experienced some form of diaspora, be it a spiritual exile from 'country', a physical departure from their homeland, a major transition into a multicultural society, a separation from ethnic roots or a theological 'going-beyond' the traditions of western Christian heritage. And what these experiences

have in common is that there is no possibility of returning to the past, although the future destination is not clear.

Australians cannot, for example, go back to a pre-European invasion land, to the iconic monocultural landscape of pre-World War II Australia, to the homeland from which they may have fled, or to the culture that existed when and where they were born. This is also true now; we cannot go back to a pre-COVID-19, pre-climate change, pre-resource scarcity, pre-recession world.

The 2016 Census recorded that

among us".

Clive Pearson puts this within the perspective of indigenous issues and an ecotheological reading of the land. This is of particular relevance in view of the emerging voice of Australia's First Peoples and the centrality of Land, the Great Southland of the Holy Spirit, to the Australian psyche.

For Land in Australia is itself experiencing diaspora. In the last 230 years, this 'timeless' Land has experienced previously unknown levels of change through land clearing, agriculture, mining and human settlement.

It now finds itself at the centre of major plans for natural resource development, like the Adani mine, that is qualitatively different to the stable ecological and spiritual relationship that existed between Land and Aboriginal people pre-European arrival.

But Land cannot return to its earlier state, and thus is 'poised in uncertainty and ambiguity' between the presence of an anthropocentric utilitarianism and an earth-based spirituality. It, too, is 'betwixt and between', on the threshold of being regarded in terms of a relationship with humanity. Tim Winton puts it this way "This country leans in on you. It weighs down hard. Like family. To my way of thinking, it is family."

So, at a time when we are facing the upheaval of climate change and other crises, we find our beloved neighbour, the Great Southland of the Holy Spirit, is also facing many

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**“ AUSTRALIA IS THUS A COUNTRY THAT IS 'BETWIXT AND BETWEEN' ”**

almost half of Australians were born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. Australia is thus a country that is 'betwixt and between', where values, goals and identity are still evolving, travelling from its indigenous origins, through European settlement to a future that incorporates the dynamics of multicultural and multifaith immigration.

So what are the faith implications of living in this state of inbetweenness? In this regard churches have been described as being communities forming and reforming: "ecclesia semper reformanda ... always en route, our eyes always looking for the new city that God is building

# LISTENING TO LAND IN A TIME OF CHANGE

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challenges. How, then, can we best serve and minister to it, recognising it as “among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor”, being precious in God’s sight, and generously giving of itself to serve humanity?

There is a vigorous public debate about climate change, with many economic, scientific, political and social factors to be taken into account. I do not need to repeat them here. Rather, as a way forward, I invite you to reflect on how you relate to the world around you, drawing inspiration from the words of Vaclav Havel, a former President of Czechoslovakia:

It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience. It is not enough to develop new machines, new regulations, new institutions.

We must develop a new understanding of the true purposes of our existence on Earth. Only by making such a fundamental shift will we be able to create new models of behaviour and a new set of values for the planet.

In this world of mystery and fundamentalism, delight and despondency, joy and pain, uncertainty and ambiguity, and peace and anxiety, we find ourselves on the threshold of something new, that escapes full definition and control. And it is here that we encounter God encouraging us



to be inquisitive explorers surveying a new territory slowly being revealed in the midst of upheaval, and blessing us all, humanity and the Earth, with second chances and new birth.

What, then, is the just solution to the challenges of climate change from the perspective of the Earth? •

## PARTNERSHIP ACROSS SYNODS

The JIM Cluster and the social justice staff in the Synod WA have moved to collaborate more intentionally. We plan to produce more social justice resources jointly that can be used across both Synods.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

**The 6 October budget contained some pleasant surprises on social justice issues we have worked on, as well as some bitter disappointments.**

Here we will cover things that got little or no coverage in the mainstream media.

On the positive side, the Treasurer announced:

- An extra \$9 million for the Seasonal Worker Program, including funds to protect the welfare of people from the Pacific and Timor Leste on the Program.
- There will be additional government funded employees who

will be located across Australia to check on the welfare of people on the Seasonal Worker Program. They will also check on the quality of the accommodation people on the Program are provided with.

- There will also be \$500,000 per year for the next two years to provide support to people on the Seasonal Worker Program.
- Funding of \$10.6 million over five years to implement the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery.
- An extra \$104.9m to AUSTRAC to address money-laundering.

On the negative side:

- Australia will cut its refugee intake from 18,750 to 13,750 per year for the next four years.
- Financial support to people seeking asylum living in Australia will be cut from \$52.6 million in the 2019-2020 budget to \$19.6 million on the 2020-2021 budget.
- Failed to provide any income support to people on temporary visas stuck in Australia who have no paid employment.
- The rate of support of JobSeeker will return to the inadequate pre-pandemic level as of 31 December 2020. •