

JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

FEBRUARY 2022

DO WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR LIFESTYLE TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT?

A number of you have raised with us the question of whether or not humanity needs to reduce consumption of goods, and whether we need to make significant changes in our lifestyle to live within our planetary limits.

This question of sustainability will be one of the key issues explored at the 2022 JIM Convention on Saturday 30 April 2022, at the Centre for Theology and Ministry in Parkville.

There is a mainstream narrative that technology developments and advancements will mean that we will be able to maintain our current lifestyle and continue on the path of economic growth. For example, install solar panels, and you are free to connect a larger air conditioning system.

A section of people in wealthy countries characterise this issue as a population growth problem in developing countries. Often the argument runs that measures must be imposed on population growth in developing countries so that people in wealthy countries do not have to adjust their current consumption levels. The issue has complex dimensions. Globally,

overall consumption is a combination of both the number of people and the level of consumption of each person. Further, should those in material poverty be asked to remain in that state for the common good and to reduce the need for action by the wealthy?

There is a scientific dimension to the issue of living within planetary limits. A range of academic disciplines contribute to an assessment of whether our lifestyle and consumption are sustainable within the planet's resources. However, the scientific assessment will always contain a level of uncertainty.

The other dimension to the issue for us, as Christians, is what our faith has to say on how we live in harmony with God's creation.

Within scientific scope of the issue, the UN Environment Programme produces a periodic assessment of the state of the earth's environment, titled 'Global Environment Outlook' (<https://www.unep.org/global-environment-outlook>).

The most recent review was conducted in 2019. The eval-

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uation found that the overall condition of our planet continues to deteriorate. Efforts by governments to curb unsustainable environmental damage are being hindered, particularly by unsustainable production and consumption. They concluded that unsustainable human activities globally had degraded the Earth's ecosystems, endangering the ecological foundations of society. The UN Environment Programme argued that urgent action was needed at an unprecedented scale to arrest and reverse the situation, thereby protecting human and environmental health and maintaining the current and future integrity of global ecosystems. Key actions they identified were:

- Reducing land degradation and

biodiversity loss;

- Reducing pollution;
- Improving water management;
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation; and
- Improving resource use efficiency.

On the theological side, Rev Dr Ruth Gutter from the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD), writing for the World Council of Churches, pointed out that there has been a significant change in theological thinking concerning the environment in the last decade. She stated:

As Protestant Christians, we believe that God, the creator of heaven and earth, came into the world in Jesus Christ to liberate it from the power of sin. In God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, God's love for his whole creation is revealed in a very special way.

Flowing from this theological posi-

tion, she argued:

If the boundlessness and immoderateness of human beings have become the greatest contemporary threats to the whole of creation, then conversion today means, above all, the readiness and ability of people to impose limits on themselves.

Such a plea for a healthy self-limitation based on the Christian faith seems to be an excessive demand and a provocation for a society in which unlimited economic growth and unlimited self-realisation are still unchallenged paradigms. It appears to many to be an unacceptable restriction on human autonomy imposed by morality and religion.

To explore this issue in more depth, a preliminary registration brochure for the 30 April 2022 JIM Convention is contained in this edition of JustAct. •

TASMANIAN GOV'T COMMITS TO REACHING NET-ZERO BY 2030

In February 2021, the Synod meeting passed a resolution on climate change. Part of the resolution called on the Tasmanian Government to put into law a commitment to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

In excellent news, in December 2021, the Tasmanian Government introduced a Bill to the Tasmanian Parliament to reach net-zero emissions by 2030. The Bill will require

the Tasmanian Government to establish a climate change action plan at least every five years. The Tasmanian Government will also need to conduct a climate change risk assessment every five years, which will inform the development of each climate change action plan. The Tasmanian Minister for Climate Change will be required to table an annual greenhouse gas emissions report and climate change activity statement in the Parliament.

The Commonwealth Government has committed to reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by

2050, but there is no legislation to back this commitment.

The Victorian Government released their greenhouse gas emissions report for 2019 on 29 October 2021. The report showed that emissions for 2019 were 25% below 2005 levels in 2019. The Victorian Government had set a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 15 to 20% below 2005 levels by 2020. The Victorian Government has also committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030. •

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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RENEWABLES EXPAND TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE, AND POWER COSTS REDUCE

Thank you to everyone who has responded to actions we have invited you to participate in over the years in support of increasing the use of renewable energy in Australia as part of Australia's need to contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

On 24 November 2021, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released data showing that solar, wind and hydropower generation increased by 15% in the 2019-2020 financial year compared to the previous financial year.

On 10 December 2021, the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) released its plans for the future of Australia's electricity market. AEMO believes coal-fired electricity generation will be shut down two to three times faster than anticipated. In one scenario, the national electricity market will operate without coal generation by 2043. Further, 60% of existing coal-fired power generation is expected to be closed by 2030. To achieve that, there would need to be a substantial in-

crease in battery and pumped-hydro storage, as well as electricity generated by hydrogen at peak times and electricity users adjusting their demand for electricity based on system conditions. In addition, there would be a nine-fold increase in electricity generated by wind and solar, from 15GW today to 140GW by 2050. Solar panels on rooves would increase from 15GW today to 70GW by 2050. Such a transition would deliver \$29 billion in net benefits.

On 10 January 2022, the Commonwealth Government announced \$40 million in funds for solar panel technology research, to make solar panels cheaper and more efficient.

Additional good news is that electricity costs hit their lowest in eight years in 2021 and are expected to continue to fall. Households saved an average of \$128 on their power bills over the last two years, driven by falls in network costs and wholesale electricity prices. Increased supply of solar and wind power generation is helping to reduce the costs. Retailer profit margins were reduced, caused by the introduction of the Commonwealth Default Market Offer and the Victorian Default Offer. Governments introduced

the Default Offers to ensure that all customers had a standard offer where Government set the price, in addition to any other offers electricity providers provided. The Default Offers prevent the electricity retailers from compelling vulnerable people onto high-cost electricity contracts by not making other offers available.

The Victorian Essential Services Commission announced on 25 November 2021 that there would be a reduction in the Victorian Default Offer for electricity by around 5%. The 200,000 Victorian households on the Default Offer would see their electricity bills drop by an average of \$70 in 2022.

The Australian Energy Regulator has also introduced new rules that require energy retailers to stop using confusing jargon on power bills. Energy retailers will also be required to provide clear summaries of their plans to their customers. In addition, they will be required to tell people if there is a better offer than the one the person is on. The new rules come into force in August 2022. Research had shown that 45% of people could not identify the cheapest offer when presented with three bill options. •



AUSTRALIA ENDS OFFSHORE PROCESSING OF PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM IN PNG

In somewhat good news, the Commonwealth Government ended offshore processing of people seeking asylum in Papua New Guinea (PNG). However, offshore processing will continue on Nauru.

As of early October 2021, there were still 124 refugees and people who had applied for asylum that the

Commonwealth Government had transferred to PNG. Of those, 88 have been recognised as refugees.

These people had the choice to transfer to Nauru or remain in PNG. Those that chose to stay in PNG were offered permanent resettlement, including access to citizenship, long-term support, settlement packages and family reunification.

In 2012, all people who arrived in Australia by boat to seek asylum were sent to offshore processing

centres for the determination of their claim. Boats stopped coming to Australia in 2014. Of the 3,129 refugees that arrived by boat between 2012 and 2014 977 were resettled to the US, seven to Canada and 28 to other countries.

At least 12 people sent for offshore processing have died, including deaths due to lack of medical treatment, suicide and the murder of Reza Barati by guards in PNG in 2014. •

FEDERAL PARLIAMENT PASSES HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS SANCTIONS LEGISLATION

In June 2021, we invited you to write to the Commonwealth Government asking that they amend Australia's law that allows for sanctions to be applied to foreign individuals and organisations. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to the action.

There was good news at the start of December, with the Federal Parliament passing the Autonomous Sanctions (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) Amendment Act 2021. The law enables the Australian Government to sanction individuals and entities responsible for, or complicit in, malicious cyber activity, serious human rights abuses and violations, war crimes and

severe corruption.

However, the JIM Cluster will continue to resource you to call for the Commonwealth Government to introduce further reforms to ensure the sanctions are enforced. For example, there is a need for measures to ensure that people who have been placed on the sanctions list cannot transfer assets into Australia or purchase property in Australia. •

GOV'T ANNOUNCES ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

The Uniting Church in Australia and its members have campaigned for decades to improve the situation and treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum. Thank you to everyone who participated in these actions.

There was good news on 17 December 2021, with the Commonwealth Government announcing it will provide \$37.3 million in new measures to better drive settlement and integration outcomes for refugees.

Where Australian community groups or businesses wish to sponsor the resettlement of a refugee to Australia, from 1 July 2022, the

charges that need to be paid to the Commonwealth Government will be reduced to 40% of their current cost.

Of the \$37.3 million, the Government will provide \$9.2 million over four years to fund a Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot, which will commence this year. The pilot program will facilitate community sponsorship of up to 1,500 refugees to settle in Australia with the support of community groups, including faith-based groups.

“The Australian community has demonstrated great enthusiasm for supporting refugees through private, community-led sponsorship programs”, said Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs, Alex Hawke. “These new measures

are designed to build on, and harness this enthusiasm, by supporting even greater engagement from everyday Australians in the settlement of refugees in their communities – providing an outlet for them to directly sponsor and facilitate the successful settlement of refugee and humanitarian entrants via the Community Support Program.”

Canada has had a community sponsorship program for refugees that has seen Canadian citizens sponsor over 325,000 refugees to settle in Canada since the 1970s.

Over four years, a further \$24.6 million will be allocated to a grants program. The grants will be available to support social enterprises that create new job opportunities and pathways to employment for refugees. •

COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT SETTLES CASE AGAINST THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

In April 2018, we invited you to write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking that they redesign the Community Development Program through negotiation with First Peoples' organisations.

The Community Development Program (CDP) is a Commonwealth Government program that has resulted in discrimination against and exploitation of many First People who have been locked out of the regular job market. The Common-

wealth Government announced in May 2021 it would redesign the Program in collaboration with First Peoples groups.

On 23 December 2021, the Commonwealth Government agreed to pay \$2 million to the First People Ngaanyatjarra council in Western Australia on behalf of 680 people who had been on the CDP.

The Ngaanyatjarra Council represents the interests of around 2,000 Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi and Pitjantjara traditional owners who reside in the Ngaanyatjarra communities.

The Ngaanyatjarra Council had

launched a class action in 2019, alleging the CDP breached sections of the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act. Following a year of confidential mediation, federal court Justice Richard White officially approved a financial settlement. The settlement found the 680 participants on the CDP had unfairly lost \$1.29 million in social security support payments due to the harsher penalties applied on the CDP.

The settlement payment will be used for an infrastructure program and arts project at Warburton, the largest community in the area. •



IMPROVEMENTS TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WORKING ON FARMS

In August 2020 and August 2021, we requested that you write letters asking the Commonwealth Government to improve protection for people who come from overseas and temporarily work on Australian farms.

There was good news on 23 November 2021. The Commonwealth Government announced that the existing Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Program would be merged under the one Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, which will commence by April 2022. The new scheme will include:

- Increased skills development for workers;
- New employers who enter the scheme will be restricted in the number of workers they are allowed to bring to Australia until they satisfactorily complete a performance review;
- Workers will be able to apply for

longer-term visas with the support of their employer;

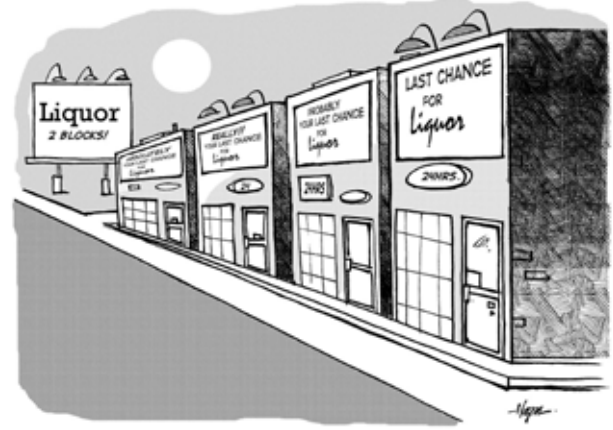
- Seasonal workers will be able to more easily move between employers to keep them in work and ensure they are earning money to send home to their families and communities; and
- There will be a 24-hour, seven days a week helpline workers can call concerning their welfare and wellbeing.

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) found that despite an 8% drop in the number of workers on horticulture farms in the 2020 – 2021 financial year, the level of produce production remained unchanged. Improved growing conditions and farmers adapting to fewer workers being available made up for there being 11,000 fewer workers available compared to the 2019 – 2020 financial year. For 80% of horticulture farms, they had the same or more workers in 2020 – 2021 compared to 2019 – 2020. On average, horticulture farms

used an average of 135,000 workers over the 2020 – 2021 year. The farming lobby has made exaggerated claims about workforce shortages on Australian farms to try and pressure the Commonwealth Government to rush in place the new agricultural visa for workers from non-Pacific Island countries before the safeguards against exploitation can be put in place. The Commonwealth Government has indicated that 55,000 people from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste are already ready and willing to come to Australia and work on Australian farms. The Commonwealth Government has already put in place measures to bring in another 20,000 people from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste by March 2022, meaning there is no need for a new agriculture visa for picking, pruning and planting work on horticulture farms.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the Commonwealth Government seeking better protection of people on temporary visas working on Australian farms. •

VIC PARLIAMENT PASSES ALCOHOL BUSINESS REFORMS TO REDUCE HARM



In August 2021, we invited you to write letters to the Victorian Liberal Opposition to seek amendments to improve the Victorian Government's Liquor Control Reform Amendment Bill 2021.

The Liberal Opposition and a number of the smaller political parties and independents in the Victorian Legislative Council did seek to amend the Bill to improve it, but all of them failed.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters seeking that the Bill be improved to further reduce alcohol harm.

The new law does contain some positive reforms to reduce the harm caused by alcohol businesses in our communities:

- Home deliveries of alcohol can-

not be left at the door of a home if no one is home on the day the alcohol was ordered;

- Home deliveries of alcohol cannot be made to someone who is already intoxicated;
- Requires alcohol businesses that do home delivery to verify the person placing the order for the alcohol and accepting the delivery are aged at least 18 years old;
- Advertising of alcoholic products is prohibited where the advertising is likely to appeal to children below the age of 18, where the advertising encourages or promotes violence or anti-social behaviour or where the advertising is sexual, degrading or sexist; and
- Milk bars and convenience stores are prohibited from being

able to sell alcohol.

However, it was not all good news. The new law will allow a growing number of fast-food outlets to sell alcohol and conduct home delivery. It also will enable non-home delivery alcohol businesses to continue to sell alcohol up to 1 am where they wish to do so.

The Government also has a Bill before the Parliament that will allow brothels and individual sex workers to operate as alcohol businesses and conduct home delivery of alcohol. The available research shows that allowing alcohol into places selling sex increases the risks to the health and wellbeing of both those selling and buying sexual activity. The JIM Cluster made a submission to the Victorian Government raising these concerns. •

COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT SEEKS ADVICE FROM YOUTH ON ONLINE SAFETY

The JIM Cluster has requested you write letters supporting measures to make the online world a safer place for all people.

The Morrison Commonwealth Government has focused on reforms to promote online safety and address child sexual abuse facilitated online.

There was further good news on 15 December 2021, with the Prime

Minister announcing the Government will establish an Online Safety Youth Advisory Council. The Council will be made up of up to 20 young Australians, aged 13 to 24 years, who will be drawn from a wide range of backgrounds. They will provide a direct voice to Government on the challenges and solutions to online safety issues that impact young people. The members of the Council will be invited to give input on topics such as online bullying and harassment, mental

health, privacy and unwanted contact from strangers.

The Prime Minister stated, "This is the next step my Government is taking to keep Australians, especially young Australians, safe online. The rules that exist in real life must apply in the online world too. We will hold big tech and social media giants to account."

Thank you to everyone who has taken action to support a safer online world. •

SUPPORTER PROFILE

JESSICA MORTHORPE

A Christian environmentalist with a passion for endangered species, Jessica is enthusiastic about the role churches can play in creating a better future for the earth. Founding the ecumenical Five Leaf Eco-Awards program (fiveleafecoawards.org) in 2008 has allowed Jessica to work across the country, sharing stories and inspiring others to care for creation. Jessica grew up in Bendigo and returned with her husband and daughter in 2021 after time interstate.

Tell me about the community or communities you belong to?

I was on the cradle roll for Eaglehawk UC. Since then, I've had the privilege of being part of multiple Uniting Church communities around Australia and I've also worked for the UCA in both environmental and intergenerational ministry roles.

What informs your Ministry?

My two pillars have always been my faith and my environmentalism. But as a teen, I struggled to reconcile the two. It seemed like science and religion were always in conflict, and it wasn't until I encountered eco-theology that things finally started to fall into place.

In my early university days, I went to a speech by the Anglican Bishop George Browning on Genesis and the environment. That day he challenged me with different readings of Genesis that finally give me permission to choose, not inherit, my theology as it related to the environment.

What are your highest hopes for the Five Leaf Eco Awards?

I hope that one day, every church in Australia will have at least one of our awards and will be making a real difference for the environment in their community. In the meantime, I'm keen to find and connect as many churches who are taking action as possible. I can't over-emphasise the importance of the community and network we are building through the Five Leaf Eco-Awards because creating change for the environment in churches can be exhausting and isolating. Often

there is just one or two people in a congregation who drive a lot of the justice and environmental work, and they can feel very alone if others don't share their passion. And there's the risk of burnout. So we try to offer some support, share stories and connect people.

What is your one hope for our climate?

I often think that if God were to wave a magic wand and get rid of human induced climate change tomorrow, we would simply end up with another huge environmental crisis within a few short years. Ultimately, climate change is just one symptom of a larger spiritual crisis within Western culture. The roots of this crisis are in the broken relationships between humanity, nature and God.

Gus Speth once said "I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation and we, lawyers and scientists, don't know how to do that." So, in my mind, that's the role of churches. We need to do the work to help people rethink how we interact with our world, and each other.

Do you think Covid has made us harder or kinder?

I was encouraged early on seeing neighbours looking after each other,



and people putting others first. In 2019, young people in the School Strike 4 Climate had a big march planned to demand real climate action. Then the pandemic was getting worse and there was concern that big gatherings posed a risk, particularly to older people. So the young leaders gave up on having a physical strike, to protect older people. That is deeply poignant to me, and highlights the sacrifice young people have made, and are stilling willing to make, to protect other people, even when their own lives and futures are at stake.

That story has been on my mind a lot. I think it's unfair that it has come to this. That young people are having to protest and campaign and beg people to care enough about their futures to do something about climate change. I'd like to see the church showing our young people that we love them by being deadly serious about climate. I'd like to see our society doing the same.

Christ always calls us back to what is most important. Loving our young people, loving God's earth, loving each other – that's the core of what being the church means to me. We need to fight for the future, together. We need to show the world the gifts our faith and tradition have to help us mend our relationships with the earth and find better ways forward. In doing so, we might save the world, and the church. •