

# JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

JUNE 2022

## GOVERNMENT TAKES ACTION FOR THE BENEFIT OF PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

**Uniting Church members have campaigned for over two decades on seeking more humane treatment of people seeking asylum in Australia. There have been welcome decisions by the Commonwealth Government in the last few months.**

On 24 March 2022, the Commonwealth Government announced that it had reached an agreement with the New Zealand Government to resettle 450 refugees in New Zealand over three years. Priority will be given to relocating the 112 people still on Nauru. The agreement will not apply to the 104 people that remain in Papua New Guinea. The New Zealand Government had offered to resettle 150 refugees in 2013, but the Australian Government rejected the offer at that time.

The resettled refugees will be allowed to apply for visas to come to Australia temporarily after they have New Zealand citizenship.

In response to the agreement, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said the “prolonged uncertainty” had “taken an enormous toll” on refugees and people seeking asylum.

The refugees that New Zealand will take will come out of their annual quota of 1,500. Australia’s yearly quota for taking people who need humanitarian protection is 13,750.

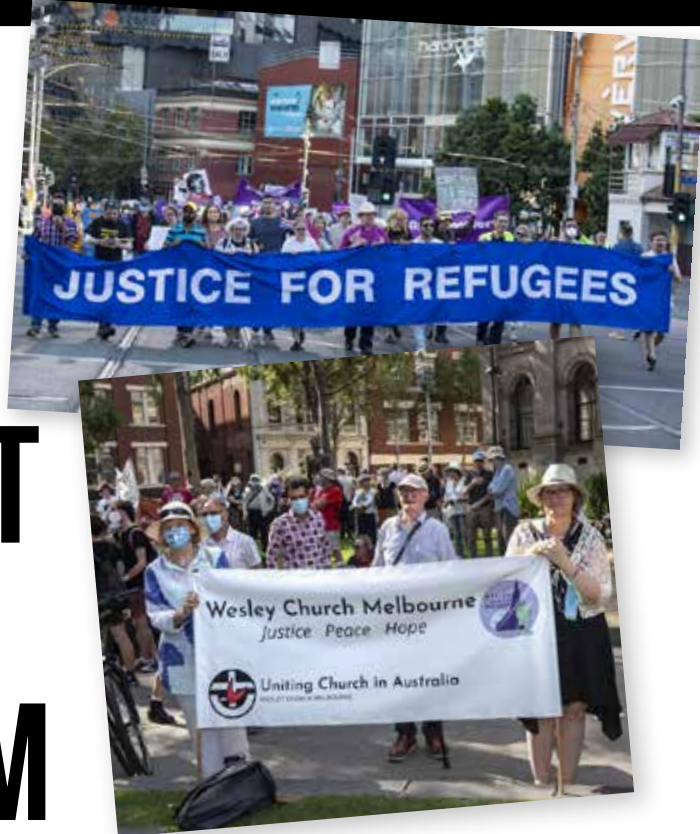
Of the 3,127 people sent to detention in Nauru and Manus Island in 2013 and 2014 under the Australian Government’s offshore processing policy, around 1,400 remain in Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Australia. Approximately 270 of these people still have applications to resettle in the US, and 159 have applications to be settled in Canada under Canada’s refugee sponsorship program.

Of the people in Australia, as of March 2022, 541 were in community detention, and 576 were living in the community.

On 29 March 2022, the Commonwealth Government announced it would provide an additional 16,500 places for refugees from Afghanistan over the next four years. These are additional to the 10,000 humanitarian visas and 5,000 family reunion visas the Commonwealth Government had already announced for refugees from Afghanistan. The combined total means Australia will resettle 31,500 people forced to flee Afghanistan by June 2026.

On 7 April, all the men detained in the Park Hotel in Carlton were released into the community. However, they will not be allowed to resettle permanently in Australia.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of the Uniting Church’s efforts to gain more humane and generous treatment for people seeking asylum and refugees. •





# UZBEKISTAN ENDS THE USE OF FORCED LABOUR ON COTTON FARMS

**For several years we invited you to send letters and postcards to clothing companies in Australia to boycott cotton from Uzbekistan while the previous regime there continued to use forced labour in the production of cotton.**

As a result, most of the companies we targeted for action joined the 331 international brands and retailers that supported the boycott. Thank you to everyone who took action to support the campaign.

In great news, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported

that in 2021 Uzbekistan had eliminated the use of systematic forced and child labour in the production of cotton. The finding was confirmed by the non-government human rights organisation, the Uzbek Human Rights Forum. At its worst, Uzbekistan forced up to two million children out of schools to harvest cotton. In addition, up to half a million adults were forced from their jobs to harvest cotton under the threat of violence or financial punishment.

In 2021, the ILO interviewed 11,000 people harvesting cotton, and over 99% reported they were working voluntarily. Of those interviewed, 0.47% reported direct or perceived threats by local officials

that they would lose social benefits if they did not harvest cotton. Further, 0.12% of those interviewed reported direct or perceived threats from employers related to loss of employment or wages if they did not harvest cotton.

Most workers reported that working conditions had improved in 2021 compared to 2020. In addition, many cotton pickers are now paid above the minimum wage in Uzbekistan.

The non-government organisations that had supported the boycott of Uzbekistan cotton called for an end to the boycott on 10 March 2022.

Uzbekistan is the sixth-largest producer of cotton in the world. •

## FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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

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



# REFORMS FOR PACIFIC ISLANDERS COMING TO WORK IN AUSTRALIA

**In the last few years, we have invited you to take action in support of reforms to provide better protection for people coming from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste to work in Australia temporarily. Thank you to everyone that has taken action in response to these requests.**

There was good news on 4 April 2022, with reforms to the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme coming into effect. Workers that come to Australia for up to nine months will be required to spend at least three months back in their home country before coming to Australia again. Uniting Church congregation members who have provided support to the workers have reported that more prolonged peri-

ods in Australia have placed great strain on the family relationships of workers. In some cases, the length of stay in Australia has contributed to or caused marriage breakdowns.

In addition, it was announced that employers that fail to demonstrate they can ensure the well-being of workers can be subjected to restrictions on the number of workers they will be allowed to bring to Australia. •



# BETTER PAY DEAL FOR SEASONAL FARM WORKERS

**We have been inviting you to take action in support of ending the exploitation of people working on Australian horticulture farms.**

At the end of April, there was good news when new hourly rates for piece work came into force. Previously, it was legal for farmers to pay workers by the amount of fruit or vegetables they picked, with no effective safeguard over the minimum rate. The system was abused by many farmers who set unrealistic piece rates. It was common for people doing the harvesting and paid by piece rate to earn as little as \$2 per hour.

In February 2022, the Fair Work Commission handed down a ruling on piece rates in the horticulture industry in a case brought by the Australian Workers Union and the United Workers Union. The Commission ruled that farmers now had to pay a minimum hourly rate in addition to any piece rate. However, people doing picking still have an incentive to work hard, as they can earn more than the minimum hourly rate if they can harvest quickly.

Farmers had the opportunity to appeal the decision by the Commission but decided not to. As a result, the ruling came into effect on 28 April.

The new minimum hourly rate for harvesting on a farm is \$25.41 per

hour for a casual worker.

In addition, there are new rules about how the piece rate must be set. The aim is that the piece rate is set so that a competent worker can earn 15% more than the minimum hourly rate. Competent workers are defined as those that have at least 76 hours of experience working at the task in question or similar tasks.

Under the new requirements, farmers are also required to keep more detailed records when they use piece rates to reduce their ability to exploit the people working on their farms.

Thank you to everyone that has supported the campaign to end exploitation on Australian horticulture farms. •

# VICTORIAN GOV'T RELEASES POLICY PLATFORM TO DIVERT CHILDREN FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

**What diversion did was acknowledge the change and not punish, not undo all the hard work by leaving a 14-year-old with a record for something stupid that was done when they were living on their own with no supports.**

*Parent of a child that was placed on the Children's Court Youth Diversion program*

**On 1 April 2022, the Victorian Government released a policy position, 'Diversion: keeping young people out of youth justice to lead successful lives'.**

Launching the position, Minister Hutchins said:

*By supporting children and young people to engage in positive activities within their community, we're not only creating a better future for them but a safer Victoria for everyone. Our work to rehabilitate at-risk young people is having a real impact on their lives and their futures.*

There has been a decline in the number of children returning to the criminal justice system after being released from imprisonment in Victoria, to 49.6% in the 2018 – 2019 financial year. The national average rate is 55%.

In 2017, the Victorian Government introduced the Children's Court Youth Diversion program. The program diverts young people with little or no criminal history away from incarceration. In addition, it provides the child with an opportunity to take responsibility for their behaviour. Since 2017, the program has diverted more than 6,000 children from further involvement in

the criminal justice system with a 90% success rate. Diversion is now the most common outcome imposed in Victoria's Children's Courts.

A 2022 evaluation of the Children's Court Youth Diversion program found that:

- Less than a quarter of those diverted by the program reoffended within six months of completing their diversion;
- Over half of children diverted by the program had not reoffended after two years of completing their diversion; and
- Reoffending among children diverted was less frequent and less severe than among young people with similar offending history and characteristics who received a different court outcome than diversion.

The Children's Court Youth Diversion program often puts in place support to help children be more prepared for life. In addition, the program contributes to positive attitudes and behaviour changes in the children. Many of the children that pass through the program maintained these positive changes after completing their diversion order. •

**Olivia is an African Australian child who lives in Melbourne. She was charged with assault and theft offences. As these were Olivia's first offences, she was placed on a diversion order under the Children's Court Youth Diversion program.**

Through the program, Olivia was encouraged to reflect on her criminal behaviour, the peers she associated with, and the impact of her actions upon the victims and the broader community. She was supported to reengage with a school. She was also connected with the Centre for Multicultural Youth and linked with a cultural mentor. The Centre joined her to a sport she loved. Olivia wrote an apology letter to the victims of her crimes.

Reflecting on her experience with the program, Olivia said, "Yeah, personally, I do think that I've changed". She thought the program helped children to stop, think and make better choices in the future.

Olivia successfully completed the diversion. As a result, the charges against her were dropped. She remained engaged with the Centre for Multicultural Youth and her sports team.

# VIC GOV'T COMMITS TO FURTHER PREVENTING YOUTH CRIME

**In October 2021, we requested Victorian supporters write to the state government to ask for reforms to reduce youth crime by addressing the causes of crime, especially for First People's youth. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to the action.**

In the May 2022 budget, the Victorian Government committed \$600 million in funding to divert young people from imprisonment, reduce reoffending, increase mental health support and provide financial support to survivors of crime.

Of the funding, \$15.5 million will go

to programs to prevent more young people from entering the criminal justice system. In addition, there was increased funding for more Aboriginal Youth Justice Hubs to help prevent First Peoples children from coming into contact with the criminal justice system as part of the implementation of Wirkara Kulpa, the Aboriginal Youth Justice Strategy.

There is funding for the Children's Court and Victorian Legal Aid to ensure children and young people are not placed into detention unnecessarily because there is no available court to hear their bail applications.

"We're investing in critical support for Aboriginal young people and youth mental health services to ensure young people can get the

support they need to get their lives back on track", said Minister for Victim Support, Crime Prevention, Corrections and Youth Justice Natalie Hutchins.

There is an allocation of \$76 million to try and drive down crime, including continuing the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility for men exiting the prison system who would otherwise be homeless.

The Victorian Government is providing \$3.6 million for a 'Women and Mentoring' program to continue to support women who are in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

The Victorian Government has budgeted to provide \$100 million in payments to survivors of crime over the next four years. •

## DECLINE IN CHILDREN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

**There was good news nationally, with research released by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare finding that the number of children in the criminal justice system has declined by 12% between 2016 and 2021.**

Of the children in the criminal justice system, 84% were under some form of community supervision, with the other 16% in detention. Of those detained, 72% were awaiting trial.

Disappointingly, in 2021, 4% of children in the criminal justice system were 13 years old or younger. The JIM Cluster continues to be part of the national campaign for the age of criminal responsibility to be increased to 14 years of age.

Children in remote areas are six times more likely to be in the crim-

inal justice system than children from other parts of Australia.

The number of First Peoples children aged 10 to 17 years old in criminal justice detention declined from 161 to 117 per 10,000 between 2016 and 2021. The number of non-Indigenous children in custody declined from 9.5 to 7.2 per 10,000 over the same period.

Victoria had the lowest rate of children in the criminal justice system in Australia in the 2020-2021 financial year. There were 7.3 children aged 10 to 17 years old per 10,000 under criminal justice supervision of some form. Victoria also had the lowest rate of young people under community supervision at 5.7 per 10,000.

The rate of imprisonment of children and young people in Victoria decreased by 14% between 2016 and 2021.

In Tasmania, the number of children

in contact with the criminal justice system declined by 11% between 2016 and 2021. In 2021, 15 Tasmanian children in every 10,000 were under criminal justice supervision. Of those, one in ten was in criminal justice detention. The imprisonment rate of children fell by 15% between 2016 and 2021 in Tasmania.

However, First People children were 11 times more likely to be in Victoria's criminal justice system than non-Indigenous children. In Tasmania, First People children were five times more likely to be in the criminal justice system than non-Indigenous children.

The JIM Cluster will continue to invite you to take actions seeking reforms to prevent crimes being committed by children and young people, and seeking expansion of diversion programs to rehabilitate those that do break the law. •

# SUPPORTER PROFILE

## CHRIS MORRIS

**It's 2012 in Prime Minister Gillard's electoral office. Her eyes are wide as saucers as she screams and grips the table to steady herself.**

"That's *funny!*" she exclaims as she gazes at a disgusting brown mess, in appearance a filthy bucket sized dunny, but with the powerful aroma of rich Fair-trade chocolate, revealed as she lifted the cake tin lid.

Twelve months earlier, Micah Australia had organized for me to meet Prime Minister Julia Gillard (PM), my local member, at the annual 'Voices for Justice' gathering in Canberra. The Voices for Justice gatherings empowered hundreds of Christians from around Australia to love our global neighbours by speaking up for the world's poorest people. We met, we worshipped, we prayed, we learned about biblical imperatives to speak up for the poorest people; we learned about Australia's (pathetic) foreign aid record, about policy and funding commitments and what we could do to try to improve them. And we put our learnings into action by meeting our members and chatting with them about poverty and specific, measurable steps Australia could take to help to address it. In 2011 the focus was on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). The PM couldn't meet us in Canberra, but her staff arranged

for me and a young woman from my church to meet in her electorate office. During the year long wait, I used my Micah training to tailor the meeting to the PM's passions: education and gender equality. Her face lit up when we explained how toilets are essential to enable girls to keep going to school after puberty – "Yes! I get that!" Finally, we asked her to



lift the lid on the poo taboo, literally she did and she screamed!

The entire Micah Campaign resulted in an extra \$250 million to sanitation and hygiene in the aid budget, and I like to think the chocolate poo cake clinched the deal.

My name is Christine Morris, or my alias, 'that bike lady.' I live, work, play – and ride my bike - on Bunurong Country, in Hoppers Crossing. I attend Hoppers Crossing Uniting Church, am on the board of a local community centre and a member of Werribee River Association. I taught English to adult migrants and refugees for 20 years and now tutor at a local primary school with the COV-

ID19 Tutor Learning Initiative.

Many in my local community recognize me because they see me all the time – on my bike. I started cycling 25 years ago initially for social justice reasons, and kept cycling because it's just so much fun, predictable, cheap and convenient. Hoppers Crossing and surrounding areas suffer from transport injustice. They are poorly serviced by public transport. For those who can't, or are too scared to ride a bike, mandatory car ownership perpetuates financial hardship and disadvantage. The infrastructure required for cars exacerbates this, and the cost of running a car makes a substantial dint in scarce finances, and those without one

are cut off from education, employment and community events. The infrastructure required for cars is environmentally catastrophic – necessitating massive ecosystem destruction and tonnes of concrete and bitumen – further exacerbating pollution and climate change even if we drive electric vehicles. In Australia, another great injustice is that a driver's license is the standard ID and many employers mandate a driver's license whether or not a job requires driving.

Australia's car addiction drives inequality both within Australia and globally. In 2018, transport emis-

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sions in Australia accounted for 18% of our total emissions, and after a short downturn during lockdowns they are higher than ever. Knowing that air pollution kills between 3,000 and 5,000 Australians a year and approximately 8 million people globally annually – a figure which does not include deaths attributable to the changing climate – how can I, as a Christian, continue to drive? The people hurting the most from pollution and climate change are those in the developing world, the world's poorest people, who have contributed to the problem the least. Every one of those people is a human being made in the image of God, and so precious that Jesus sacrificed his life for them. As a member of Christ's body on earth, how can I not care for global neighbours I will never meet: their lives are the most precarious of all?

The Bible is heaving with God's love for all creation, and especially for the poorest people. Poverty is an anathema to God. As we read the scriptures, again and again the bible exhorts us to care for these people; to nurture creation, to respect the land, give it a Sabbath rest, and only take enough. It commands us to harvest inefficiently so that the poorest people can come and glean. Land was to be returned to original owners every 50 years, making excessive generational disadvantage virtually impossible. First Nations peoples throughout the world have learned to live with the land yet until recently, we ignored their ancient wisdom. If we followed the bible's teaching and the ways of First Nations, there would be no extreme poverty.

Let's consider our transport choices, and most of us do have choice. Making sustainable choices would reduce our impact on crea-

tion and the pollution and climate crisis just a little. Perhaps we could love our global and local neighbours more as Jesus would have us do if we become mindful of our every decision, every choice, every action.

I baked a *Fairtrade* chocolate cake for the PM because this guaranteed everyone involved in making the chocolate is paid a fair wage. Many products are made by slave labour. Much of what we consume is environmentally damaging. I attempt to bring my beliefs and lifestyle together by considering human rights and creation before I act. I took the bus, not the plane to Canberra. I try to avoid single use plastics and never drink bottled water. I buy Fairtrade. I holiday locally. I ride my bike. It's fun!

When we live more simply, others can simply live. •



## VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

**In the May 2022 Victorian budget, the state government announced \$42.2 million to support 64,000 Victorian households to take up solar panel rebates and zero-interest loans to install solar panels. There was also funding for \$2,950 rebates for an additional 1,700 solar batteries for households with solar panels on their roofs.**

# TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT COMMITS TO BUILDING MORE HOMES

**In February 2022, we requested that our Tasmanian supporters write to the Tasmanian Government to ask the government to build an extra 1,000 houses per year for the next ten years to address homelessness.**

In May 2022, the Tasmanian Government committed to building 10,000 new social and affordable homes by 2032. In addition, they will establish a new Housing Au-

thority by October 2022.

The Tasmanian Government stated they had built 337 homes last year, with a further 1,169 homes under construction.

On 7 April 2022, the Tasmanian Government released a policy framework to address child homelessness in the state, entitled 'Under 16 Homelessness. Children and young people under 16 who are alone and at risk of or experiencing homelessness'. Among the reforms included is establishing a single point of contact and advice

in the Department of Communities Tasmania. The point of contact will strengthen oversight and accountability for the care and well-being of children facing the risk of homelessness. There will also be a trial of three new regional Youth and Well-being positions to support the policy framework and provide case management for children at risk of homelessness.

Thank you to all our Tasmanian supporters that wrote letters calling for state government action on homelessness. •



## COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT COMMITS \$73 MILLION TO SUPPORT THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

**In October 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking for reforms to better protect the rights and well-being of people with disabilities. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to the request for action.**

There was good news on 7 April 2022. From 1 July 2022, 59 organisations across Australia will be provided with \$73 million over three years to deliver the National Disability Advocacy Program. Under the Program, advocates provide support to address issues of discrimination, abuse and neglect.

"Advocacy is vital in ensuring the needs and rights of people with disability are listened to and considered in decision-making", said Minister for Families and Social Services Anne Ruston. •

## VICTORIAN GOV'T FUNDING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

**We requested that Victorian supporters write to the state government in April 2022 to ask for further reforms to support people with disabilities. In the May Victorian State Budget, the government announced \$15.1 million to implement the State Disability Plan 2022-2026.**

The budget also announced \$372 million to hire more than 1,500 mental health workers, including 400 mental health nurses, 100 psychiatrists and 300 psychologists.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in April. •