



National Council of
Churches in Australia
Social Justice Network

Social Justice MATTERS

What does the Lord require of you?

SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

Sunday, 29 September 2013

From the General Secretary

... what does the Lord require of you but to do justice ...

–Micah 6:8

Embracing the call to do justice is indeed very challenging. This year, as Australia approaches a federal election, the churches want to give a clear message that *Social Justice Matters*. At present basic human rights and dignity for all are overlooked in a range of issues and policies. Australia's political leaders need to consider actions that remove areas of injustice.

The prophets of old cried out for justice and people like Micah revealed that work for justice is not only a personal commitment of faith but, together with the commitment of others in their communities, it also has the power to save and transform a nation.

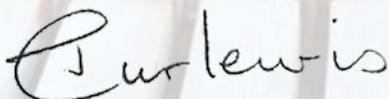
Before you is the 2013 Social Justice Sunday resource that takes us back to why social justice matters for the Christian churches. Often we are busy with the “doing” of social justice work and need to take some time to reflect on the biblical foundation and imperative of who we are called to be: people who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

This resource touches on examples of social justice work that the churches or church agencies are doing: upholding basic human rights and support for refugees, inclusion of people recognising their ability, poverty alleviation, Indigenous injustices and awareness of violence against women. These are only some of the areas of our social justice work.

The NCCA Social Justice Network hopes that this resource will strengthen the work that you are already involved in locally and perhaps compel you to see national and global justice matters to address.

On Social Justice Sunday we hope that all Christians will discover anew that *Social Justice Matters*; it is not an “optional extra” but core to who we are as the people of God.

Grace and Peace,



Tara Curlewis
General Secretary
National Council of Churches in Australia

Social Justice: The Biblical Foundations

The prophet Micah gave us a blueprint for living a “godly” life: this then is what God asks of you, only this, *to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God*. These ingredients — justice, love and humility — underpin the development of social justice in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament.

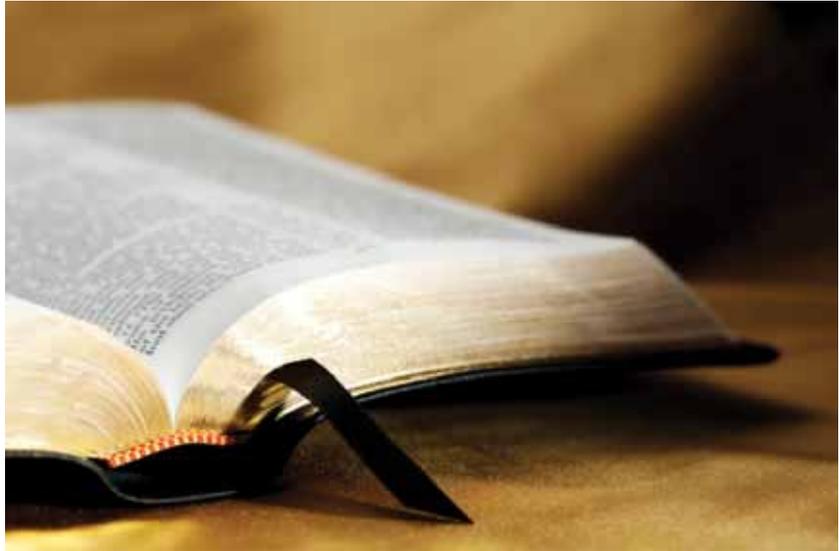
The Hebrew Scriptures document, in great detail, the suffering and oppression of the Israelites under Egyptian rule and their dramatic rescue by God. God hears their cry, brings them out of Egypt and forms a covenant — a binding agreement based on the development of right relationships between the people, their God, each other and the land.

Underlying the Exodus account is the notion of a compassionate God who responds to the needs of people. But this covenant with God requires the people to exercise the same compassion for the vulnerable. In Israelite communities the vulnerable were identified as the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger.

Constant reflection on the Exodus event reveals the necessity for structures to be put in place to protect the poor and vulnerable. In Leviticus 25, God tells Moses that every seventh year is to be a Sabbatical year when the land is to have its rest and every 50th year is to be a year of Jubilee when those in debt bondage are freed, confiscated land is returned and ancestral duties and obligations are carried out. It is to be a year of liberation.

The role of the prophets was to remind Israel of its history, to speak out in God’s name and denounce those who exploited, oppressed and crushed the poor and the vulnerable. Amos railed against the rich who lived in opulence while others starved, Isaiah took to task those who abused their political or religious power and Jeremiah made it quite clear that if the people of Israel were to have a relationship with God they must take care of the poor and vulnerable.

Jesus is no less insistent that to know God involves a concern for the poor and vulnerable; but Jesus goes a step further and turns upside down notions of power and authority. He identifies with the rejected, good news is preached to the poor and the outcast, they are healed of their ills and their exploiters are challenged.



Jesus emphasises in myriad ways the essential dignity of every person. It is precisely because this poor, alienated person is made in the image of God and beloved of God that all are called to attend to his or her needs.

Having a relationship with God is much, much more than adherence to religious laws and rituals; it requires a humble, loving service of others. Devout Jew though he was, Jesus denounced the structures of oppression put in place by the Pharisees and challenged them to liberate those weighed down by the burdens of law.

Wherever Jesus went he preached the Reign of God characterised by justice, peace, love, wholeness and wellbeing. He died a death at the hands of political oppressors supported by the religious leaders of the day — an expression of absolute humanity and solidarity with all those who suffer.

For 21st-century Christians the challenges are just as great. What are the structures which keep people poor, the Indigenous discriminated against, the disabled alienated, the asylum seeker rejected and the land decimated?

To have a relationship with God requires that we act justly towards the vulnerable in our community, that we love those with whom we disagree or whose behaviour we deplore and that we walk humbly with the outsider, the different, the other.

Sr Libby Rogerson, IBVM

Millennium Development Goals: A Job that Needs Finishing

All of us have jobs that we leave unfinished, which are the source of much frustration. All of us have to-do lists that never seem to get done.

But some things just shouldn't be left unfinished.

In the year 2000, Australia, along with the other 188 member states of the United Nations, committed to achieving eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in order to halve poverty by 2015. Those goals included reducing the number of children dying before their fifth birthday by two-thirds, reducing the number of mothers dying in childbirth by three-quarters, and halving the number of people without access to clean water or a toilet. We committed to "spare no effort" to free people from extreme poverty.

Some things are worth finishing.

Most people don't realise that significant progress towards these goals has already been made.

Since 1990, we have:

- *Halved the number of people living below the extreme poverty line of US\$1.25 per day.*
- *Halved the proportion of people living without access to clean drinking water. On current rates of progress, 92% of the world's population will have access to clean drinking water by 2015.*
- *Reduced the number of children dying before their fifth birthday from 12 million a year down to approximately 7 million a year.*
- *Reduced the number of women dying in pregnancy/childbirth worldwide from 543,000 women to 287,000 women - almost half.*

This is phenomenal progress but there is still much to be done.

As the 2015 deadline for the MDGs fast approaches, there is no option for us to delay. We believe poverty is contrary to God's desire and intention for the world and its people. Every child or mother who dies needlessly is motivation for us to finish well.

As a nation, finishing well means urgent action to accelerate progress toward the international target of 0.7% GNI going to aid. Our current contribution is just half of that target at 0.35% GNI.

It also means working to remove the brake on progress that is caused by multinational tax evasion. Poor countries are losing billions of dollars in revenue that is rightfully theirs due to the unjust practices of Western companies operating within their borders. Australia can help shine a light on this situation by requiring companies that are registered in Australia to report all payments they make and receive on a country-by-country basis.

For Christians, finishing well means pressing on towards the goal — pressing on towards God's promised new creation, where God and God's people are reconciled, where righteousness, peace and justice are established and where there is no more mourning, no more pain, no more death.

When Jesus cried out on the cross "It is finished!" he ushered in the assurance of his kingdom and this new creation. Because of this assurance, we live hope into a broken world. We live like we know our citizenship is of a different place.

We have the opportunity to be part of the solution to poverty in our world. We invite you to run with us into the 2015 deadline for the MDGs. Be part of the movement of everyday prophets in communities from every corner of the country, raising our collective voice to our leaders with a clear message: "Let's finish what we started."

John Beckett, National Coordinator, Micah Challenge Australia

Action ideas: visit www.finish2015.com.au

Taking Responsibility for Justice: The Case of Refugees

When we hear of the atrocities, persecutions and violent conflicts in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Burma and Sri Lanka, there is a natural sympathy for the civilians caught up in the violence. It is human nature to empathise and feel compassion.

It is no coincidence that churches have a longstanding commitment to refugees. The Bible is full of stories of exile and aliens living in foreign lands suffering oppression — desperate people fleeing famine, brutality and enslavement.

Jesus even calls on us directly to “welcome the stranger”. As Australians, we have a collective history of leaving violent countries and the opportunity to start a new life. We also have a strong sense of justice and fair play; of sticking up for the under-dog and protecting people in distant lands.

Over the past decade in Australia, however, these same people — refugees fleeing in fear of persecution — have been demonised. They are branded liars, “illegals” and queue jumpers, who pose a major criminal threat requiring mandatory police reporting. They are even called terrorists. Politicians then champion a crack-down on boat people and “act tough” in order to win votes or an election. Social justice is about what is a just and fair course of action.

If you had the power to decide the fate of a family or an unaccompanied minor who arrived in Australia seeking our protection, what would you do? If you knew that the average length of time a refugee spends in a refugee camp is 17 years, could you blame a parent for not wanting to watch their children grow up on ration packs and handouts in a squalid, remote camp with little or no education and poor or non-existent health care?

Current situation

Developing countries host 80 per cent of the world's 15 million refugees. Most cannot return home, despite wanting to, and are not permitted to integrate into their

host countries, which prefer to contain refugees in remote border camps. With so few resettlement places, less than one per cent can be resettled each year.

Currently, the Australian government, despite implementing a range of harsh border control measures, is trying for the first time to systematically build the capacity of regional organisations to help protect and support refugees in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

It is critical that Australians have their voice heard. There is so much that we can take action on.

In 2012 the Government increased in Australia's humanitarian intake but the Opposition has said that, if elected, it would revert to 13,750 humanitarian places per year instead of the current 20,000.

We currently have more children in detention than ever before and 60 people with adverse security assessments (ASIO clearances), who are in “limbo” in indefinite detention. Sri Lankan asylum seekers are being turned back and not even given the chance to formally apply for asylum.

You can take your message to your local parliamentarian, call talk-back radio or write to your local newspaper and tell them you want action to stop punishing and vilifying refugees. Tell them Australia should be “welcoming the stranger” as well as addressing the root causes by brokering peace deals and providing aid and protection to improve the refugee camps. We should stop putting the burden on other, less affluent countries.

Asylum seekers are not asking for special treatment, just a fair go. When we deny people their rights, we become part of the continuum of persecution that asylum seekers fled in the first place.

James Thomson, NCCA - Act for Peace



Disability, Spirituality, Accessibility

The church affirms that Christ is most fully present when all people in the Body are unconditionally accepted as people of worth.

Along with all members, the faith, gifts, hopes and dreams of people with disabilities are to be valued and honoured. The church seeks to embody a community life that in its theology and practice is accessible to all people. God is affirmed as a God of justice and peace, who seeks reconciliation among all people. The church seeks within its own life and society a vision in which people with disabilities are treated justly and have their hopes realised.

Approximately one in five Australians identify as a person with a disability; this is projected to be one in four by 2051 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). There are many different kinds of disability, caused by accident, illness or genetic predisposition. They include physical, intellectual, sensory, cognitive and neurological impairments.

The call by people with disabilities is not to provide “special” religious or spiritual activities, but to engage them in all aspects of faith communities and spiritual expression. A person’s disability should not be a barrier to consider any role in interest, knowledge or friendship.

While physical access changes are applauded, some people speak less favourably about attitudes and diminished expectations of their role and contributions. People are placed at risk where they feel less included and placed in situations where they have to defend, explain or advocate

for themselves. While this is sometimes seen as necessary in terms of educating and informing others, it can become a tiring and demoralising experience.

Faith communities also need to seek balance, offering multisensory worship experiences and opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in the whole life of the faith community. They then can focus on the person’s abilities, strengths and gifts, while accommodating for additional needs.

Considering the needs of people with disabilities and widening opportunities for spiritual expression in faith communities will also widen opportunities for people without disabilities to engage in spiritual expression and participation.

As a place where all people are welcome, the church is often challenged to find ways to accommodate a wide and wonderful variety of people. Access includes not only entry but also enjoyment of all the church’s services and facilities. When all church building facilities are physically accessible, when the worship and activities are truly accessible, then a greater number of other people are also enabled: elderly people, people who are unwell, children and parents with prams.

Commitment to change needs to come from a range of sources. Cooperative partnerships and collaboration need to be fostered within religious communities, in which the voices, stories and aspirations of people with disabilities are taken seriously. There is also an opportunity to develop collaboration more fully between religious communities and a range of community “bridge-builders” who are in relationship with people with disabilities.

For more information and support in making changes, refer to the Disability Action Plans developed by the Uniting Church in Australia Synods of Victoria and Tasmania; New South Wales and the ACT. These can be found at:

http://unitingcarens.wact.org.au/advocacy/issues_index/disability and <http://blogs.victas.uca.org.au/disabilityinclusion/2013/03/disability-action-plan-2003/>

Often we (people with disability) ourselves bring out compassion in others. We help people to discover others sides of themselves. We, the disabled community, as we demand a place in the sun, are a reminder to the whole human family of the need for justice, for inclusion. We stand uncomfortably, often within our faith communities, reminding them that they cannot be who they are without us. We do not ask for their pity, we ask for justice, and we say to our faith communities, “Don’t include us in your community, but together we must create a community which is for all of us. And that is very different.” We are not asking the faith communities to be nice to us and feel good about it. We are saying, “You cannot be a faith community without us.”

Michael Lapsley
Anglican Priest, South Africa

Susan Stork-Finlay
Uniting Church in Australia



The Call for Leadership: The Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls

In March 2013 the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW57) met in New York with the goals of reaching a commitment on the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls.

With over 6,000 participants from across the world, the contributions were drawn from a diverse mix of nations, faiths and cultures.

Global issues included, among others, the forced labour of men women and children, the trafficking of women and girls, child marriage, and women's rights to education and safety.

Other priorities included the impact of climate change, particularly in the Asia Pacific region — including Australia. Incidences of domestic violence have been shown to peak following natural disasters such as droughts, as well as the flooding and burning that is occurring on a more regular basis. The increasing rate of violence is evident across all of the nations of the Pacific.

In Australia, domestic violence is one of the most common forms of violence against young women and all women over 55 years of age, particularly those living in rural and remote locations. The increasing impact of climatic change and natural disasters on rural communities compounds this problem. It does not matter what class, culture or religion; all women in these age groups are particularly at risk. Factors that contribute include:

- Rural women live within communities with norms and values that do not encourage obtaining assistance outside of the family.
- Poor telecommunications, long distances and an absence of support services are significant barriers to escape and/or protection.

Significantly, domestic violence has a ripple effect across families and communities that fragments the wellbeing and resilience of rural life.

Indigenous women are more vulnerable to prolonged and more serious forms of violence, and are ten times more likely to be victims of homicide. While Aboriginal women

experience the highest imprisonment rate across Australia, the majority of those women have also been victims of abuse. Indeed “a violent relationship” now forms part of the expectations for the future for many of the younger generations of Indigenous women and girls.

During the United Nations Commission, the ecumenical delegation presented a statement in response to these issues, calling for greater leadership by the Church in the prevention of violence against women and girls. This document highlights the role of the Church as an agent of change in an increasingly violent world and acknowledges the need to partner with men and boys to eradicate violence.

The call to leadership is supported by previous statements; for instance, from the Anglican Communion, from Rowan Williams and a letter from the Primates in 2011, stating: “The Church must become ‘a living witness’ to the belief that men and women are made in the image of God ... our teaching and preaching must include the significance of peaceful relationships since those clouded by conflict hinder our relationship with Him.”

If we continue to support the silence on this issue, by ignoring the violence around us, then we too become part of the problem.

Within Australia, domestic violence is increasing. This trend is unlikely to change if the Church (along with other organisations) fails to lead on this issue. All people need to know that their Church is both relevant and safe and that its priority is the living out of the Gospel.

The Church must acknowledge the pervasiveness of domestic violence, the impact of climate change on the wellbeing of families and communities and the need for justice in relation to the plight of Indigenous women and children. Indeed, it can no longer be silent — and must become part of the solution!

The Rev. Karen Kime

Archdeacon for Indigenous Ministries

Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn

RESOURCES

Resource Links

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre: www.asrc.org.au
AusAid: www.ausaid.gov.au/aidissues/mdg/Pages/home.aspx
Christian Lawyers Association ("Jesus was a refugee"): www.christianlawyers.asn.au/articles/Refugee%20Debate.May2011.pdf
Disability Studies Quarterly (book review on disabilities): <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/538/715>
Human Rights Commission: www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/asylum-seekers-and-refugees
Micah Challenge: www.micahchallenge.org.au
Make Poverty History: www.makepovertyhistory.com.au/
People with Disability (PWD): www.pwd.org.au
Refugee Council: www.refugeecouncil.org.au
United Nations: www.un.org/millenniumgoals

Social Justice Resources in Australian Churches

Anglican Church in Australia: www.anglican.org.au/content/governance/commissions/Public_Affairs.aspx
Anglican Refugee and Migrant Working Group: www.anglican.org.au/content/community/working_groups/Refugees.aspx
Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: www.acmro.catholic.org.au/
Australian Catholic Social Justice Council: www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au
Faith doing Justice: www.faithdoingjustice.com.au/issues/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/catholic-social-teaching.html
Lutheran Church of Australia (refugees): www.lca.org.au/refugees--new-arrivals.html
Uniting Church in Australia UnitingJustice: <http://assembly.uca.org.au/unitingjustice/>
Uniting Church in Australia, Victoria-Tasmania (multi-faith disability inclusion project):
<http://blogs.victas.uca.org.au/disabilityinclusion/>

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NCCA Social Justice Network: www.ncca.org.au/departments/social-justice
Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce <http://www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce.com.au/>
Indigenous Millennium Development Goals:
www.ncca.org.au/departments/natsiec/advocacy/indigenous-poverty/143-australian-indigenous-mdgs
Millennium Development Goals:
www.actforpeace.org.au/What_We_Do/Reduce_Poverty/Reduce_Poverty1/Millennium_Development_Goals.aspx

Church-based asylum seeker organisations

Lentara UnitingCare asylum seeker programs: www.lentarauc.org.au/asylumseekerprograms/
Bridge for Asylum Seekers Foundation: www.asylumseekersfoundation.com/
House of Welcome, Refugee Support: www.houseofwelcome.com.au/

Acknowledgments

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