

SECURE COMMUNITIES

Far too often older Western Australians are seen as easy targets. In fact, since 1992 reported offences against people aged 55 years and more has increased almost 145%.

This situation is intolerable.

Labor recognises that it is imperative that we act now to create a society where older Western Australians are – and feel – safe in their own homes and in the community.

It requires a comprehensive response from State government: tougher penalties, more police out on the beat and better policing strategies

and increased support for dealing with the causes of crime. And the fact of an ageing population highlights the priority that must be given to the implementation of this response.

Labor knows that by giving our seniors a fair go, we are building a better and safer community for Western Australians of all ages.

Extract from *Protecting WA Seniors*, Western Australia Labor Party policy, for the 2001 election, available on the policy page for the Minister for Police and Emergency Services; Justice; Community Safety, Western Australian Government, <http://www.ministers.wa.gov.au/>

Most of us expect state governments to take steps to address the problem of crime in our local communities. Police patrols, tough penalties, and crime prevention make us feel that our community is taking steps toward being safe and secure.

ARE WE BUILDING SAFE COMMUNITIES?

Most of us like to feel safe in our local community: to go out shopping or for a stroll without being afraid; for our children to be able to walk to school in safety; or to visit the next door neighbour without having to lock up our house. Many of us, however, live in communities where we just don't feel safe. We have security doors, window grills, and alarm systems – as we read about home invasions in the newspaper. We get concerned about the younger people hanging around the street or the train station – as we watch television news stories about young women being raped in parks or public toilets, and adults being brutalised for the sake of a handbag or some jewellery. It is not surprising that state elections generally involve an emphasis on law and order – as we turn to our governments for security from the people in our community who make us feel very unsafe.

But how often do we turn to our governments and ask them to help the people whom we fear?

What would the political parties say if we placed expectations on our governments to save people from becoming the perpetrators of crime?

The political parties might say:

Far too often criminals are seen as easy targets. In fact, since 1992 reported gaoling of people who commit crimes has increased almost 145%.

This situation is intolerable.

Labor recognises that it is imperative that we act now to create a society where people are – and feel – protected from the likelihood of becoming criminals and ending up in gaol.

Do you think about those who commit crimes? who they really are? and why they have come to live in such a different way to you?

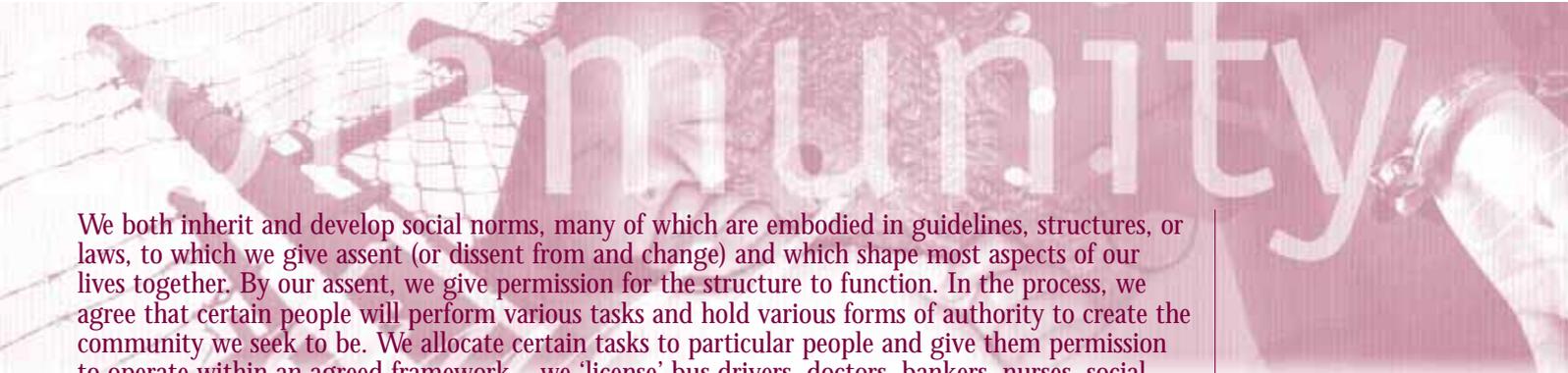
Truth Criminals are people. Just like you, your family, and your friends, they are created in the image of God and have intrinsic worth as humans.

BUT WE STILL NEED POLICE, RIGHT?

Yes, of course we do!

For society to function properly we need sets of commonly agreed social values and norms, and ways of responding to those who breach them. We need laws and we need people to enforce them.





We both inherit and develop social norms, many of which are embodied in guidelines, structures, or laws, to which we give assent (or dissent from and change) and which shape most aspects of our lives together. By our assent, we give permission for the structure to function. In the process, we agree that certain people will perform various tasks and hold various forms of authority to create the community we seek to be. We allocate certain tasks to particular people and give them permission to operate within an agreed framework – we ‘license’ bus drivers, doctors, bankers, nurses, social workers and numerous other people to take on responsibilities that contribute to or enable the community. This is true also for institutions and organisations within a society. Our Church systems and structures operate in similar ways.

We live alongside each other, abiding by the norms. Some norms are conventions and others are enshrined in law – including those defined negatively through the ‘illegality’ of things. Together, we make society work.

The police are charged with enforcing those norms enshrined in law. In theory, citizens and the police work together to keep the peace, by ensuring that all people can understand and abide by the values and norms which underpin the society. Problems arise as a community grows in size and social systems and structures become more complex. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to make the connection between the norms and the well-being of society. The drift into individualism in our society exacerbates this problem. We lose sight of the importance of participation and co-operation by all citizens and begin to regard the police as those who fix problems on our behalf, instead of alongside us.

Instead of regarding our community security as a community responsibility, we look to the police to provide it.

As our communities become larger and more fragmented it is not surprising, therefore, that the calls for “more police” or “more power for the police” or “harsher sentences for criminals” become more frequent and more insistent. We make these calls both formally and informally, in Parliament, through the media, around dinner tables, and in coffee shops...

It is this reaction that propels us into a world of “ultra security”. In an effort to protect ourselves and our families and friends (and the things that we have) we both exclude others from the community and isolate ourselves from the community in which we live. We develop highly punitive systems to deal with those who have broken the law that do little to rehabilitate.

Our need for policing to ensure that our communities are safe is a genuine need – the question is: how can we balance our community need for safety in both our public spaces and our homes with our community need for ‘community’?



REAL SAFETY IS REAL COMMUNITY!

Policing policies may offer a quick fix to problems but they can only ever offer limited security for the community. As Christians, we should seek our security in community with God and each other.

No-one could possibly accuse the Bible of being short on laws. In Exodus we read the laws given to Moses by God for a people freed from slavery but living in exile. The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy outline even more laws relating to religious practices, and social, moral and economic codes. Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament biblical scholar and theologian writes that the purpose of Leviticus was to enable a people who were in exile to gain some control and order of their lives through an intentionally lived relationship with God. The laws in Deuteronomy are about the building of community and neighbourliness.¹ Many of the laws are framed in such a way as to enable the restoration and healing of the victim, the offender and the community at large. While, in the twenty-first century we might have very different sets of laws and legal processes which are secular rather than religious, the aims remain the same – order and community.

At the heart of all the Old Testament laws, however, were God’s justice and God’s call to transformation. It is these aspects of the Law that were significant for Jesus. In the Gospels, we read that Jesus was more concerned with compassion, transformation and restoration than he was for the following of laws for their own sake. Through his words and his deeds Jesus demonstrated that laws and rules are meant to work for the benefit of people. In the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus makes it clear laws should not take precedence over people’s basic needs.

¹ Brueggemann, W. (1997) ‘Conversations Among Exiles’, originally published in the *Christian Century*, July 2-9 1997, available at www.religion-online.org.

²³One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

Jesus also challenged the social practices and religious codes relating to social exclusion. Jesus touched the sick and ate with those who society defined as sinners. Jesus forgave people and healed people so that they could once again participate in society and rejoin their communities.

Jesus' message was that no-one was outside the love of God, and that while the religious laws were important, more important were forgiveness, healing and grace. For those that lived contrary to the law, Jesus offered hope – the good news is about transformation and new life.

One of the most challenging teachings of Jesus appears in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount:

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'
⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; (Matthew 5:38-44)

Mercy Jesus' call to his followers to love with the grace of God was challenging. It called for a generosity beyond that which is easy or comfortable. People who treated you with aggression were to be loved in return. Jesus called for an end to retribution and revenge. People were to be offered the hope for transformation that comes with forgiveness and reconciliation not retribution.

Justice The challenge for Christians today is to continue the work of Jesus to build communities which are geared towards healing and wholeness rather than retribution and punishment.

DO YOU TAKE CHRISTIAN STEPS TOWARD SECURITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Community is at the heart of what it means to be human. In the Trinity we see the Divine intention for relationship and gain an insight into how we are made in the Divine image. Thus, anything which breaks community is not of God, and it is required of us to be involved in the divine project of creating, maintaining and, where it is broken, restoring community between people.

We will not build safe communities by locking up more and more people and imposing increasingly harsher sentences on convicted criminals. We will not grow healthy communities by perpetuating cycles of aggression and violence. We must work to focus more energy on the building of healthy communities. We need to ensure that strategies for law and order do not contribute to the breakdown of community. While it is vitally important that for criminal activity restitution is made to victims and society, it is also vitally important that we acknowledge and solve the root causes of crime.

What are some common ways in which we contribute to the breakdown of community?
How can we live differently?

Community Community can not be forced or 'enforced' through policing or any other means. A healthy, safe and life-affirming community grows out of relationship and shared responsibility. It grows when the values and social norms of a community are seen to contribute to people's well-being and are understood as a force for good for everyone. Many of the root causes of crime are addressed when we pursue justice and peace, for example, when we ensure that the most vulnerable people in our communities are cared for, when we work to alleviate poverty and end racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.



Any group or program which brings hurting people together – and we all hurt at some level in our being – has the possibility of bringing healing and restoration. This way we can contribute to building security in our neighbourhood. Some ways in which congregations contribute to community-building include meals, op shops aimed more at conversation and less at making money, art therapy sessions, play groups for parents with young children, open house for tea or coffee, or a garden project.



FINDING OUT MORE

- Read *Being a Neighbour*, published by the Social Responsibilities Commission of the General Synod of Anglican Church of Australia, 1997
- Read *Peace in Troubled Cities: Creative models of building community amidst violence* by Dafne Plou, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998
- Watch the video *Peace to the Cities: Stories of hope*, produced by the World Council of Churches, Geneva
- Get involved by organising a group to participate in a course. There are a number of good courses available. The following organisation can suggest a suitable course for your church group.

The Institute of Restorative Justice & Penal Reform (WA) Inc
The Institute was established to conduct research, education and service delivery in the area of restorative justice in the criminal and civil legal systems.
The contact is: Theo Mackaay, Chairperson
IRJ&PR, PO Box 831, Scarborough, WA 6922
Tel (08) 9263 2063 Email: srcperth@iinet.net.au

The cost of over-reliance on policing is often felt by those who 'appear undesirable'.

One of the ways in which governments have responded to our calls for community security is by giving police powers to 'move people on' from public spaces such as parks and shopping precincts. These powers allow 'informal' contact between police and people who have not committed any crime – and are not even suspected of committing a crime. These 'move on' powers are used quite frequently, in public spaces like parks or shopping precincts. They allow neighbourhoods to be 'swept' of 'undesirables'.

This does not mean there is no place for a police service in a modern community. However, it calls into question the community's willingness to use the police service to clear the streets of people who they think 'look' like trouble-makers. Can we accept the notion that people who are not a danger to others should be denied access to public spaces?

To allow that some people are not welcome among us fractures the human community which Jesus came to save. It ignores the example of Jesus in his touching those who were on the outer in his community and his sharing meals with those considered 'notorious sinners'. On any day in any of our congregations or church buildings, we have the opportunity to meet those who 'do not fit'. How we respond to these people is an indication of our response to God in Christ. Do we take them in, or do we seek to move them on?

None of us can realistically hope to live without coming into contact with people who are not like us, whether in dress or circumstances or worldview. Every city and town includes people who confront our sense of security because they appear to be, if not strange, then at least the stranger. It is, however, illogical to assume that a person who looks different is a threat to us. And it is another step again to think that their removal is desirable or even necessary for our security.