

PEACE BE WITH YOU

*Witnessing to peace
in a violent world*

*Social Justice Sunday
September 26, 2010*

From the General Secretary

2010 marks the end of the Decade to Overcome Violence, an initiative of the World Council of Churches to which the NCCA and state ecumenical councils have been committed since it commenced in 2001.

The Social Justice Network thought it appropriate to reflect on the Decade — looking back on what has happened in our own circles, what has happened in the wider world and what each of us has done to contribute in our own way to overcoming violence.

Overcoming violence calls us to be peacemakers, which is at the heart of the mission set before followers of Jesus. His proclamation that peacemakers are blessed of God inspires us to the peacemaking, individually and collectively. It also reminds us where we have not lived up to his proclamation. Peace is never to be declared lightly, as Jeremiah 6:14 reminds us when he speaks out against those who proclaim “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace. The work of peacemaking requires courage, endurance and vigilance, knowing that we are doing God’s work.

Violence in its many forms continues to be part of our world. As followers of Jesus, we put this into the perspective of God’s Reign of Peace, which was inaugurated in Jesus’ ministry and awaits fulfilment. We can seek peace in our own circles and in seemingly intractable conflicts; and with the love of God we can build on the discoveries we make.

This year’s Social Justice Sunday resource is offered as a reflection on some of the initiatives which have been taken during the Decade to Overcome Violence. While reading this, you may think of other initiatives or work for peace that has a longer history. I hope that this resource will shape discussion in congregations, youth groups and small groups. It is also hoped that the resource will contribute to our collective prayers for peace and as inspiration to our calling of peacemaking.

Tara Curlewis

Tara Curlewis
NCCA General Secretary.

Experiences and challenges from the Decade to Overcome Violence

In countless conflicts across the globe, the shadow of violence continues to obscure a new horizon for peace. Nevertheless, as we reflect earnestly at the conclusion of the Decade to Overcome Violence we should draw inspiration from the continuing outward gaze of the ecumenical movement in Australia in standing in solidarity with the victims of violence across the world.

Traditionally, in times of conflict and amid the terrors of deprivation and need, the Church has often held firm as a place of sanctuary and succour. Sometimes it has had a very mixed response, with some sections fearful and silent or even siding with persecutors. The Church reflects both the highs and lows of our human condition.

In many flashpoints across the globe, the Church speaks forcefully for the preservation of human dignity, the broader protection of rights of individuals and communities, and has achieved many peace dividends, some small and some great.

In **SUDAN**, the Church was instrumental in guiding a relatively violence-free election process this year, amid longstanding tensions between the Muslim north and Christian areas of the south and in light of the forthcoming referendum on the south’s secession.

In the restive southern region of the **PHILIPPINES**, the Church has successfully brokered dialogue between warring parties, introduced peace zones for civilians and stood firmly for the rights of indigenous and marginalised groups.

PALESTINE-ISRAEL

The recent confrontation at sea aboard the Gaza aid flotilla squarely focused the gaze of the international community. Though the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has worn many guises over many decades of impasse, this attack with its tragic aftermath further degraded our humanitarian imperative.

In the fractured West Bank, the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment program has for many years borne truthful witness to the plight of Palestinians and Israelis whose lives remain mired in conflict. (See: www.ncca.org.au/departments/eappi)

In response to the failing attempts to end the cycle of violence in Palestine and Israel, a voice from Palestinian Christians, the Kairos Document, has spoken loud and true: “Our parish communities are vibrant and most of our young people are active apostles for justice and peace. In addition to the individual commitment, our various church institutions make

our faith active and present in service, love and prayer.”

You can sign on to support this document at www.kairopalestine.ps.

SRI LANKA

During the Decade, the Sri Lankan experience — a formal 2002 ceasefire leading, after some years, to again failed peace negotiations; the inability to use the challenge of the devastating 2004 tsunami to help end the war (unlike in Aceh, Indonesia); and the final military crushing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the Sri Lankan forces in May 2009, with many thousands of civilian and combatants' deaths — could provide important lessons for the churches, United Nations agencies, governments and armed non-state actors. These lessons can be for either military and political strategies to defeat dissident or “terrorist” groups or, in contrast, the strengthening of institutions and methods, including international assistance to protect efforts to lessen distrust, deliver “peace dividends”, hold parties accountable to agreements and protect human rights amid fragile efforts to negotiate a just, lasting peace.

The final 2008-09 conflict period in Sri Lanka, with displacement of 300,000 people, shocking death and suffering and allegations of war crimes by both sides in the war, raises disturbing questions about how combatants and the international community should in future respond more urgently and effectively to protect civilians caught in war.

Achieving a truly just and lasting peace involves addressing many post-war challenges: resettlement, shelter, basic services and livelihoods for internally displaced people in war-ravaged, landmine infested areas; reconciliation between ethnic communities, including meaningful devolution of political and economic power so minority communities feel

more empowered and truthfully confronting how the conflict ended; reintegration of former combatants into society; fostering the healing, safety and full human rights of all through strengthening war-eroded institutions, upholding the Constitution and guaranteeing a free media; large-scale reconstruction; and bridging the suspicion between the Sri Lankan Government and a large segment of a distrustful international Tamil diaspora. The United Nations Secretary General has appointed an expert panel to advise him on Sri Lanka and the people of Sri Lanka will need all our support to rebuild their futures.

Ben Fraser

International Programs Coordinator,

John Ball

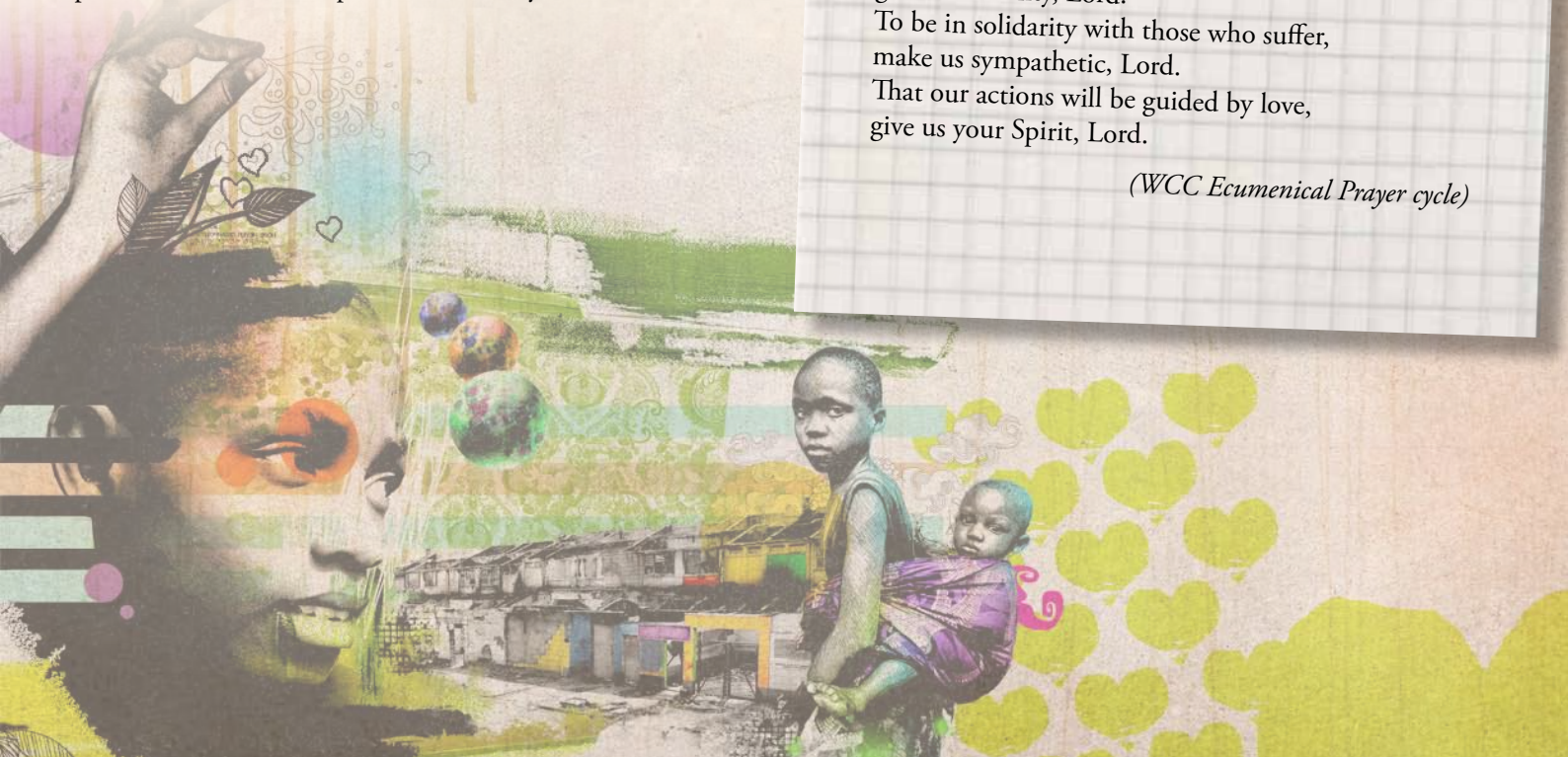
International Programs Coordinator,
Act for Peace

The international aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA)

PRAYER

To be more patient
give us strength, Lord.
To become peacemakers,
equip us, Lord.
To be right,
give us your light, Lord.
To accept our faults,
give us humility, Lord.
To be in solidarity with those who suffer,
make us sympathetic, Lord.
That our actions will be guided by love,
give us your Spirit, Lord.

(WCC Ecumenical Prayer cycle)



First and Last

Over the course of our history we have discriminated most consistently against two groups of people in Australia: those who were here first, Indigenous Peoples, and those who have come last, asylum seekers and refugees.

The struggle for Indigenous People to take their rightful place in the life of this nation remains the great unfinished business of our history. Indigenous people continue to find themselves at the bottom of every social indicator in the nation.

An Aboriginal child born today has a 17-year lower life-expectancy than a non-Indigenous child born today. Indigenous adults are three times more likely to die from cardio-vascular disease than non-Indigenous adults and the death rate from renal disease is seven and 11 times greater for Indigenous males and females respectively. Indigenous adults are 13 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous people and Indigenous juveniles are 28 times more likely to be placed in juvenile detention than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Aboriginal People in the 73 “prescribed” communities have their income managed — under the Northern Territory Emergency Response — whether they need to or not and this policy has now been extended to all people to avoid appearances of racism. The recommendations of the report *Little Children are Sacred* have still not been implemented.

Much of the debate around asylum seekers and refugees has been characterised by the politics of fear. We have locked people away in remote detention centres and denied them a face. Thank God the Pacific Solution is no more but the Government took a backward step with the suspension of processing of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka and by re-opening the Curtin detention centre.

What is it about our irrational fear of boat people?

There is something about us and boats. Maybe they hold up a mirror to the rest of us. I wonder if we see something more frightening in that mirror. Maybe they remind us of the unfinished business and violence of our history.

Think of how media and community debate responds to the death of an underworld figure, for example. What regularly emerges in such commentary is a general acceptance that he “*had it coming*” and “*what goes around comes around*”.

There seems to be an assumption that those who deal out so much violence deserved to die violently. If these feelings of fear and revenge have such traction in our national psyche, no wonder we are terrified by the arrival of “boat people”. We know what the first “boat people” did. What goes around ...

If this sounds irrational, so is our fear of boat people — 95% of asylum seekers come by plane, not by boat.

How do we move beyond this fear?



G. RUSSELL - MUNDINE

Tell the truth.

Own that we did not settle this country peacefully but took it violently. Establish right relationships with the First Peoples by making a Treaty and paying just compensation for the ongoing dispossession. Close the gap in living standards created not by “disadvantage” but by blatant discrimination and injustice.

Maybe then, when we stand honestly in this land and can face the First Peoples with some integrity, we can face those who need to come here, in boats, with open hearts.

The first and last peoples remind us of what needs to be done.

Phil Glendenning

Director, Edmund Rice Centre

PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION

In the midst of conflict and division,
We know it is you
Who turns our minds to thoughts of peace.
Your spirit changes our hearts:
Enemies begin to speak to one another,
Those who were estranged join hands in friendship,
And nations seek the way of peace together.
Let your spirit be at work in us.
Give us understanding and put an end to strife,
Fill us with mercy and overcome our denial,
Grant us wisdom and teach us to learn
From the people of the land.
Call us to justice.

(adapted from the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation II)