



24-27 June 2016
Mary MacKillop Place
80 William Street
North Sydney

Social Justice Network

Report to 2016 National Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia

SOCIAL JUSTICE NETWORK TERMS OF REFERENCE

Purpose

The work of the Social Justice Network is to assist the NCCA in its commitment to “encourage and enable the member churches, in the light of the gospel, to give prophetic leadership to each other and to the community” particularly on issues of social justice.

The Social Justice Network assists the member churches to carry out those objectives, with a particular emphasis on social justice, outlined in NCCA Constitution, Article 4:

- speaking out on behalf of oppressed people;
- acting in solidarity with Aboriginal and Islander people;
- responding to human need and acting on issues of justice, peace and creation.

Mandate

The Social Justice Network is mandated to:

- provide a means by which member churches communicate on issues of social justice and help each other to a deeper understanding of the implications of the gospel for social justice in Australia;
- facilitate co-operation between the churches, and, where appropriate, their joint action, as they seek to give prophetic leadership to each other and the Australian community through their commitment to promoting justice, peace and the integrity of creation;
- advise the NCCA on actions which might appropriately be taken by the Council and/or severally by the member churches.

HOW HAS THE SOCIAL JUSTICE NETWORK FULFILLED ITS PURPOSE AND MANDATE?

The SJN has been an important forum for representatives of NCCA member churches to share the work being done by the churches in their advocacy for a just and peaceful society. We have shared our projects, our stories and reflections on such issues as the situation for refugees and people seeking asylum, policies and responses to climate change, advocacy for the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, poverty and inequality in Australia, gambling and human trafficking.

In reference to the Purpose of the Network, “to encourage and enable the member churches...to give prophetic leadership to each other and to the community”, the opportunity provided by the network to share and encourage each other has been important.

The SJN has published two resources, both for Social Justice Sunday (the last Sunday in September). In 2013, ahead of a federal election, the resource entitled *Social Justice Matters: What does the Lord require of you?* focussed on why social justice is important to Christians and to churches. It highlighted some issues of longstanding concern for churches and church agencies including the Millennium Development Goals, refugees, rights for people with disability and violence against women and girls. The 2014 resource, *Gambling and Its Impact*

in Australia: Is nothing sacred? sought to highlight the concern of the NCCA and its member churches about the growing gambling industry in Australia and its destructive influence on the lives of many Australians.

The SJN had been producing the NCCA resource for Social Justice Sunday annually since 2004, with funding from UnitingJustice Australia (until 2013) and the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

In 2014, the network reviewed its commitment to the production of the resource. The resource had been the only piece of work able to be undertaken by the SJN in any one year. It was labour intensive for a network whose most active membership were all busy producing denominational resources. It was also the case that despite numerous requests for feedback from member churches, it had always been difficult to assess the impact of the resource and how widely used it was beyond the Uniting and Catholic churches. As a one-off publication that was not connected with any broader NCCA strategy and program, it also failed to serve as a platform for NCCA engagement in the public space. It was acknowledged that the member churches are much better placed to produce such resources, which they regularly do.

In asking the question, ‘how could the SJN better meets its mandate?’, it was determined to engage in a longer-term project, ‘What do the churches say about...?’ Many NCCA member churches have formal position statements on matters of social justice and public policy. One of the difficulties for the NCCA as a council of churches speaking out against injustice in our society is that we are not always aware of how much we have in common and what may be the limits of what we can say together about any particular issue. It is also the case that there is no one place where church members, teachers, school students, researchers, academics and journalists can go to find what churches have said on matters of social justice. The aim of the ‘What do the churches say about...?’ is to fill both those gaps with an online, searchable, user-friendly collection of statements from NCCA members churches and the NCCA itself.

The members of the SJN have been gathering key resolutions and statements and a project worker has been contracted to begin the work of organising them into a ‘library’ for the NCCA website. The first thematic collection will be ‘What do the churches say about... Peace’. Other themes which are likely to emerge as ones with significant consensus across the churches include poverty and inequity, the environment, justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

With the SJN’s first funding grant from the NCCA received for the 2015-16 year, the project worker has begun work on a resource which will bring into dialogue the call from the World Council of Churches to engage on a pilgrimage of justice and peace with the long history of action and advocacy for peace by Australian churches, including their official statements as gathered in the first stage of the ‘What do the churches say about...?’ project – ‘What do the churches says about...Peace’.

MEMBERSHIP AND CONVENORS

The members of the Network are:

The Very Rev. Dr Peter Catt (Anglican Church of Australia)

The Rev. Narsai Youkhani (Assyrian Church of the East) – resigned December 2013

The Very Rev. Fr Abanoub Attalla (Coptic Orthodox Church)

Mary Hilmy (Coptic Orthodox Church)

The Very Rev. Steven Scoutas (Greek Orthodox Church)

Major Marion Weymouth (The Salvation Army – Southern Territory) – retired June 2015

Major Sandy Crowden (The Salvation Army – Southern Territory) – appointed June 2015
Casey O'Brien Machado (The Salvation Army – Eastern Territory)
Wies Schuiringa (Religious Society of Friends (Quakers))
John Ferguson (Roman Catholic Church)
Sarah Menassa-Rose (Roman Catholic Church) – resigned SJN December 2013
Sr Louise McKeogh FMA (Roman Catholic Church) – joined February 2014
The Rev. Elenie Poulos (Uniting Church in Australia)
Jill Ruzbacky (Uniting Church in Australia)

Attendance at meetings has usually been confined to a small core group with some members not attending meetings. Not all NCCA member churches have formal structures/staff positions identified to engage with the mission of advocacy and education in social justice. However, these churches often engage in social justice work in their schools and communities. The SJN encourages these churches to engage with the work of the SJN, to support their representatives to attend the meetings and to ask for feedback for their church communities.

The SJN also encourages member churches to be mindful of both the Terms of Reference and the meeting schedule (6 x 1-2 hour weekday meetings per year) when considering their nominations for the SJN. The SJN has been less than it could have been for the absence of a number of representatives over the course of the triennium.

Convenors

The SJN elects its own Convenor. The role of the Convenor is to prepare and distribute the agenda, maintain contact with the committee members, act as the contact person with the NCCA General Secretary about the direction of the SJN and the administrative tasks for the preparations for the meetings. The Convenor facilitates the meetings.

Convenor: Wies Schuiringa (to February 2015)

Co-Convenors: Jill Ruzbacky and Elenie Poulos (from April 2015)

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

On 29 March 2016, enabled by the one-off funding, the SJN network gathered in Sydney for a full day face-to-face meeting to talk about the work and the future of the SJN. It has been clear for some time that the SJN has not been able to meet the second and third points of our purpose, that is, facilitating joint action by the churches and advising the NCCA on actions the Council might take in its commitment to be a prophetic voice for justice in Australian society.

There is significant diversity among the NCCA member churches in relation to how the church should or should not engage in the public space on matters relating to public policy and government. Yet Article 4 of the NCCA Constitution (reflected in the ‘Purpose of the SJN) describes the NCCA as having a mission to speak out against and act on issues of justice, peace and creation.

It is the hope of the Network that the ‘What do churches say about...’ project will provide a helpful foundation for the future advocacy work of the NCCA, uncovering issues of shared concern across NCCA member churches. This project on its own, however, is not enough to form a foundation or framework for the NCCA’s active participation in civil society as a voice upholding the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society and the care of creation.

It is the intention of the SJN to produce a paper for consideration by the NCCA Executive which explores the theology and practice of faith-based and ecumenical advocacy and the role of the NCCA as an advocate. It will draw on the history of the NCCA including its public statements and the work of the SJN, as well as the work of the WCC. It will pay attention to the Lund Principle and begin to articulate a foundational theological framework for NCCA advocacy.

REVISING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Social Justice Network has reviewed its Terms of Reference. Concerned about some of the out-dated language and recognising that some of the text is a direct quotation from the NCCA Constitution Article 4, the SJN has proposed that the objects of NCCA be reworded in the new constitution. We understand that our proposals for change have been accepted by member churches.

The SJN proposes to amend the Terms of Reference in order to update, simplify and better focus the mandate. The proposed revision also includes the suggested rewording of the relevant NCCA Objects (without specifically quoting from the Constitution).

Proposed Revised Terms of Reference

The Social Justice Network gives expression to the NCCA's commitment to "encourage and enable the member churches, in the light of the gospel, to give prophetic leadership to each other and to the community" by

- speaking out against injustice, violence and oppression; and
- working to uphold the dignity of all people and the flourishing of all creation.

The Social Justice Network is a forum for NCCA member churches to:

- communicate about issues of justice, peace and creation;
- reflect theologically on the implications of the gospel for social justice in Australia;
- facilitate co-operation between the churches on matters of justice, peace and the integrity of creation; and
- advise and support the NCCA on actions which might appropriately be taken by the Council and/or by a group of the member churches.

PROPOSAL

That the NCCA National Forum

1. receive the Social Justice network Report
2. approve the revised Terms of Reference for the Social Justice Network