

JUSTACT

NEWS & RESOURCES FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION UNIT

SEPTEMBER 2017



From Left to Right: Rev. Denise Liersch, Ken Turner, Jeff Randles, Michael Sukkar, Cath James, Matthew Maury

LOCAL MPS URGED TO DO MORE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Uniting Church members and other faith groups are meeting with local MPs all around Australia to hand over their community climate petitions calling for stronger action on climate change.

On 5 August, Uniting Church and TEAR members met with Member for Deakin, Michael Sukkar. He accepted the 302 signatures collected in churches in Blackburn, Croydon and Forest Hill and agreed to table them in Federal Parliament.

The Deakin petition is one of many 'Community Climate Petitions'

being presented simultaneously in almost 100 federal electorates across Australia.

Rev. Denise Liersch, from The Avenue Uniting Church in Blackburn says: "My faith calls me to be concerned about climate change and the unfair impact it's having on people in our community."

"We feel strongly that in our local community there is substantial support for more urgent action to reduce our greenhouse emissions," Ken Turner also from The Avenue in Blackburn, said. "It's about creating a better future for everyone."

Jeff Randles from Blackburn North –

Nunawading Uniting Church became involved when he realised that the coordinated effort by so many groups around the country had the potential to have a greater impact.

Meetings have also taken place in the electorate of Melbourne, and meetings are planned for the electorates of Murray, Wills, Jagajaga, Franklin, Braddon and Ballarat in the near future. Contact Cath James, 0438 504 394 or cath.james@victas.uca.org.au for more info. •

ONLINE SPORTS BETTING CORPORATIONS BANNED FROM PROVIDING CREDIT

The Federal Parliament has passed a law banning online gambling corporations from providing credit to gamblers.

This is a welcome step as these corporations have often provided lines of credit to people deeply harmed by gambling, placing them into further debt.

Jack was on a Disability Support Pension and had joint title with his mother on their home. He received a phone call from a sports betting corporation representative who offered three \$1,000 free bets so he could 'get a feel for the service'. He then got an e-mail saying 'I have set up your account. I have put the free bets in.' He initially declined the offer of credit, but about two weeks later he discovered \$10,000 in credit in his account. Within a couple of months his credit limit was increased to \$80,000. Jack

used the money and lost it. The betting company then tried to take possession of the home and demanded that Jack and his mother vacate the property within 14 days.

The new law will put a stop to this type of predatory behaviour.

The law also imposes penalties for online gambling corporations that are not licenced in Australia that take bets from Australians. Only online gambling corporations licenced in Australia are legally permitted to take bets from Australians. In response to the law, online poker companies, Partypoker and 32Red announced they will stop illegally taking bets from Australian gamblers. Pokerstars is the only online poker corporation now openly illegally taking bets from Australians.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters to the Federal Government in response to actions we issued calling for online gambling reforms. ●

In July we invited you to write to the Federal Government asking they protect people from the predatory practices of payday lenders and consumer lease businesses.

In a sign that consumer lease businesses continue to prey on disadvantaged people in our community, on 20 July the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) announced that consumer lease business, The Rental Guys, had repaid \$100,000 to regional customers after ASIC found they failed to meet their responsible lending obligations when renting white goods and furniture.

Under new contracts, the customers, mainly from regional Indigenous communities in NSW, were charged higher rates and gave up their rights to own goods, that they had under their original contracts.

ASIC Deputy Chair Peter Kell said: "We will continue to focus on the consumer lease industry, because consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers who lease essential products, should not be disadvantaged by rental companies' poor compliance."

It is not too late to write to the Federal Government to urge reforms that will protect people from the exploitative practices of these businesses. ●

CONSUMER LEASE BUSINESSES CONTINUE TO FLEECE DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION UNIT

Mark Zirnsak - Director
Denisse Sandoval - Campaign Organiser
Jill Ruzbacky - Social Justice Officer
Cath James - Communications and Campaigns Officer

Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
130 Little Collins Street
Melbourne, Victoria 3000

Phone - (03) 9251 5271
Fax - (03) 9251 5241

jim@victas.uca.org.au
<http://www.justact.org.au>

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 Unit on the details above.

WINE TAX EFFECTIVE IN STOPPING ALCOHOL ABUSE, BUT NOT POPULAR

The World Health Organisation has found that governments increasing alcohol taxes is one of the most effective measures to reduce alcohol-related harm in a community.

In Australia, we have a very low wine tax that makes cask wine the cheapest form of alcohol and the alcohol of choice of those misusing alcohol.

Unfortunately after a review of wine taxes, the Federal

Government has made only minor amendments to the wine tax system. Wines businesses will now only get their first \$350,000 of profit tax free from 1 July 2018, instead of the current first \$500,000. There are also some minor reforms to try to end the current forms of tax fraud and tax evasion used by wine businesses.

Thanks to everyone who sent postcards to the Federal Government on this issue. ●

In October 2016 we requested you write letters to the Federal Government regarding funding cuts to aged care.

In May 2017, the Federal Government announced an extra \$649 million a year to create an extra 9,911 aged care places,

including facilities to support vulnerable dementia patients. Victoria will get 2,645 of the places, Queensland 2,680, NSW 2,470 and Western Australia 1,623.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters in response to the October action. ●

INCREASE IN AGED CARE PLACES

THAI GENERAL FOUND GUILTY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In August 2014 we requested you write to the Government of Thailand asking that they investigate allegations that government officials and military officers had been involved in human trafficking of people from Burma and Cambodia.

In July 2017 a Thai army general was among those found guilty of human trafficking and was sentenced to 27 years in prison. Lieutenant-General Manas Kongpaen was among 62 people found guilty in a trial that started in 2015. The arrests came after mass graves were discovered in southern Thailand containing 36 bodies of victims of human trafficking, mainly Rohingya Muslims from Burma's western Rakhine state.

Seo Naing, a Rohingya man accused of running a jungle camp where dozens of people were murdered, was sentenced

to 94 years in prison. Two Thai politicians from southern Thailand, including a former town mayor, were sentenced to 75 and 78 years respectively

The trial had been marred by threats against witnesses, interpreters and police investigators. One witness was abducted by six men claiming to be police who held a gun to his head. Another witness was beaten by a police officer in an attempt to stop him from testifying in the trial. ●

In April we requested that you write to the Federal Government about reforms to address family violence.

As of mid-June 2017, none of the \$20 million the Federal Government had allocated to prevent family violence in October 2016 had been spent.

On 19 June 2017, the Federal

Government announced an extra \$13.8 million to go to Our Watch to fund initiatives to help prevent family violence.

If you did not write in April, it is still not too late to do so. ●

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FAILS ON SPENDING TO PREVENT FAMILY VIOLENCE

BELONGING AND HOSPITALITY



Throughout history, belonging to a tribe of people has helped define and protect us. Social researcher Hugh Mackay says the desire to belong is one of the 10 desires that drive all of us, even for those who cherish time alone. For people with disabilities, and their families and carers, participation and belonging have at times been problematic.

Scottish theologian Professor John Swinton says, “One of the things that we don’t always notice in the life of Jesus is the way that sometimes he’s a guest and sometimes he’s a host.”

What would it be like to be a guest in the home of someone with dementia, cystic fibrosis or profound disability? We need to be guests in one another’s homes to understand people in a body vastly different from ours. We tend to think our spirituality is personal but it is always something we do together. Through this we become more than if we remained by ourselves.

While people with disabilities cannot be discriminated against by law, this does not always lead

to inclusion or belonging.

“To be included, you simply have to be there, but to belong, you need to be missed,” Swinton says.

“You need to have a space within your community that is for you, so that when you’re not there, people miss you, people long for you in the same way as the father longs for the prodigal son.

“And in order to do that you have to have a particular kind of community, which is not simply an inclusive community ... but a community within which people know the different shapes and forms and beautiful bodily shapes and accept them, exactly as they are.”

Prof Swinton said the task of the church in creating these communities of hospitality and belonging can begin with small gestures.

The Faith Communities Council of Victoria released a statement last year calling for the following ‘small gestures’ from faith communities and for faith leaders to play their part in ensuring that people marginalised by disability experience a sense of welcome and social inclusion, based on the principles of justice, equality and love.

These include that:

- (i) their physical and sensory needs are addressed in order to be present at times of worship and social activity;
- (ii) they experience a sense of unconditional welcome and belonging and are not treated differently on account of disability; and
- (iii) they be consulted as to their particular participation in the life of their faith community.

In addition to creating spaces where people with disabilities can belong, many Uniting Church members have been part of campaigns we’ve run to end the abuse and neglect of people with mental health issues and disabilities and we are starting to see some progress. The Victorian Government has now rolled out the ‘Safewards’ program to 18 inpatient facilities across the state, and plans to expand its implementation. The program has reduced the use of seclusion (placing people with mental health issues in solitary confinement) and around 50% of staff report feeling safer as a result of the program.

In addition, at the end of June the Victorian Government announced \$1.5 million to fund disability advocacy groups.

The Minister for Housing, Disability and Ageing, Martin Foley, said when he announced the funding: "Advocacy is one of the most important safeguards in protecting and upholding the rights of people with a disability – so we're making sure their concerns are heard and acted on when needed. More than 50% of this funding will bolster support for disability advocacy in rural and regional areas."

The Victorian Department of Education has also announced that it will release data on students with disabilities being grabbed by the wrists, pushed to the floor and locked inside rooms.. The Department has acknowledged that these methods can have "serious consequences including injury and death." Across the Victorian schools system, students being restrained or confined is used more than three times a day. The Department of Education will review who is being restrained, the types of restraints used, and why it is being used. The Department has stated "There is no evidence that using restraint or seclusion is effective in reducing the occurrence of problem behaviours." Victorian schools have been banned from using straps and harnesses to restrain students.

University of Melbourne Professor Keith McVilly says some students have broken bones after being restrained or thrown to the ground using the "takedown technique". This involves forcibly pushing a child to the ground and holding them down. Professor McVilly is part of a pilot program teaching teachers research-

backed Positive Behaviour Support where teachers identify the causes of students' behaviour, adapt the students' environment to make them more comfortable, and help them develop skills to communicate their needs. Research shows toothache, stomach problems and other physical pain or psychological trauma often causes people with disabilities to lash out, and if the underlying needs were addressed, the behaviours would occur less frequently, if at all.

Victoria's Public Advocate, Colleen Pearce, wants seclusion to be banned in schools. "School students with disabilities are one of the last remaining groups in

“PEOPLE LONG FOR YOU IN THE SAME WAY AS THE FATHER LONGS FOR THE PRODIGAL SON.”

society who can have their liberty and freedom restrained without proper guidelines."

Discrimination against school children with disabilities continues. Twelve-year-old Angus would sometimes arrive at school and find his classroom was empty, as all his classmates were on an excursion, except for him.

"They kept the excursions a secret. I wasn't even told about them", Angus said. Angus is among the one-in-three students with a disability who say they have been excluded from events or activities at school, including excursions and camps.

Angus's mother Kate said her son's self-esteem plummeted after he was excluded from camps and excursions. "They don't

understand the impact it has on these kids", she said. "His self-esteem is so low. He doesn't value himself."

Queensland University of Technology academic Linda Graham said while she understands schools might be fearful about taking some students on excursions, there's always a solution. This might involve asking parents to attend, or ensuring there is an aide or additional teachers. "There are a myriad of ways schools can deal with this, but it seems to me they consider the challenge and the extra workload too hard."

In March 2017 the Victorian Department of Education and Training established the Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution to better deal with complaints against schools.

The Independent Office was recommended by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in response to cases of discrimination and abuse of school children with disabilities and mental health issues.

The JIM Unit encourages you to continue campaigning for an end to abuse, neglect and exclusion of people with disabilities and mental health issues.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters to the Victorian Government in support of reforms to ensure people with disabilities and mental health issues can live safely. •

GOV'T REVIEW OF YOUTH JUSTICE RECOMMENDS BETTER STAFFING AND PROGRAMS

In February we invited you to write letters to the Victorian Government urging reforms to the youth justice system to rehabilitate young people who have broken the law and help them get their lives back on track.

A government review of the youth justice system has confirmed the need for many of the requests we have made, including the need for adequate staff training and a better understanding of young people in the system. The review also found that poor quality facilities and a lack of programs for young people contributed to the spate of violent riots recently.

In April, Brendan Murray, the then-exclusive principal of schooling inside Victoria's system of youth detention facilities, was fired by the Victorian Government after blowing the whistle on mistreatment of youth detained in the Grevillea Unit of Barwon Prison. He also pointed out that understaffing in the youth justice system had contributed to the riots.

Other recommendations from the review included:

- Maintaining prison as an option of last resort;

- Expanding the use of restorative justice to address the causes of the young person breaking the law;
- Ensuring children aged 10-17 years in custody are separated from adult prisoners; and
- A targeted response for those who are at higher risk of offending and diversion from imprisonment for those who pose a lower risk.

The Victorian Government has accepted all 126 recommendations of the review either in full or in principle, and committed a further \$50 million over four years to implement 42 of the report's priority recommendations. The government funding includes:

- \$7.4 million towards boosting training and skills for youth justice staff including tactical response training and bringing the duration of their training into line with Corrections Victoria staff;
- \$11.5 million to assess all young offenders in custody and in community supervision for their risk of reoffending, violent behaviour, and identify acquired brain injuries, intellectual disabilities, and other mental health concerns. This will ensure young people throughout the youth justice

system are connected to the programs and services that directly target their offending;

- \$8.8 million towards new programs for young offenders that directly address their offending behaviour, including programs targeting violence, as well as programs for young people struggling with drugs and alcohol. The new programs will be delivered in both custody and in the community; and
- \$1.3 million investment for a strategy to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in youth justice.

Unfortunately, the Victorian Government still plans to build its youth mega-prison at Cherry Creek at a cost of \$288.7 million. The experience of such prisons in other places, such as the US, are that they are a failure and lead to an increase violence and re-offending, undermining community safety and well-being.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters to the Victorian Government on reforms for the youth justice system in Victoria in February. •



SUPPORTER PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH REV LISA STEWART BY DENISSE SANDOVAL

Just a few weeks ago, the Tax Justice Network Australia, which is led by the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, conducted lobby visits with federal MPs to discuss how a progressive taxation system helps our communities and how it will help vulnerable people.

Rev Lisa Stewart and JIM Unit campaign organiser Denisse Sandoval visited Kelly O'Dwyer's office in the Higgins electorate to discuss corporations paying their fair share of tax and how this is connected to the bigger picture of a fair and just society.

DS: Tell us about yourself.

LS: I've been an ordained minister in the UCA for 14 years. I'm just coming to the end of my placement at Glen Iris Uniting Church and community centre after accepting a call to a new position (more of that later.) I am also the very proud single parent of two great kids - they're adults now, so I probably should stop calling them kids! But I think life as a single parent certainly opens your eyes to some of the

inequalities in our Australian community.

Prior to ministry I spent 15 years in financial admin and accounting, most of which was spent in tax accounting firms, so I understand the mindset around tax minimisation and avoidance.

How would you explain Tax Justice to someone who isn't aware of this term?

The whole tax system rests on a very simple, but a very just and fair idea - that people contribute, as they are able, out of their earnings from within a community, to a common pool of resources that is then utilised for the benefit of the whole community. Taxation revenue is there to provide essential services and infrastructure for the wellbeing of all people. That system is profoundly compromised when those most able to contribute, the wealthiest and most profitable groups and corporations operating in the community, fail to offer back a fair share of the profits they have made from within a community and its resources. Tax avoidance certainly has a huge financial impact on that shared pool of resources and the community's capacity to adequately fund its

services and infrastructure. There is then, of course, the human impact in the loss of funding for education, hospitals, services for the most vulnerable in our community - we all bear the cost of that tax avoidance. There is also, too, a profound moral impact. People lose confidence and trust in a system they perceive unfairly benefits a few elite groups and corporations. That is corrosive of a sense of being part of and contributing to community that is there for all people - it erodes a shared vision of a 'commonwealth'.

Why did you join me in the lobby meeting at Kelly O'Dwyer's office on Tax Justice?

I was aware of wearing a few hats simultaneously for that visit. Firstly as a private citizen who votes and who is concerned about fostering a more equitable society, secondly as the minister of a congregation in Kelly's electorate to signal that this is a matter that concerns her constituents. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, attending the meeting as part of a delegation from our UCA's JIM Unit enabled us to give voice to the particular values and vision of community life that is at the heart of the UCA's mission and ethos.

LISA STEWART SUPPORTER PROFILE (CONT.)

We were able to insert into the public conversation language around justice, fairness, truthfulness, accountability, responsibility - language and ideas that can so often be missing. That, I think, is a crucial contribution the Church can make. The meeting was one small, but very effective way of doing that.

How can people engage more with social justice issues?

One thing I've come to learn in my own growth into more active participation in social justice issues is the huge value of small measures. Too often we see problems as so large and seemingly intractable that we feel powerless to make a difference. The meeting reiterated for me that it is precisely in taking those seemingly small steps - taking time to attend meetings, writing that letter, phoning the local MP, attending public events - that little--by-little, there is an incremental gathering into

something that can have a far greater impact than we imagine. Do the small thing, do it often enough and in good company, and big things can happen.

What is your new role at Uniting?

I've recently been appointed to the role of Mission and Ethos Partner (Western Victoria and Tasmania) with our new community services organisation Uniting. I don't start until October, but I'm very excited about the move. It will be incredibly rewarding to be working with and for our agencies who serve at the very coalface of where these issues of justice, equality, inclusion and participation impinge on the lives of so many people in our community.

Anything else you would like our readers to know about you?

I'm a Saints supporter. Don't judge me! •

DATES & SOCIAL JUSTICE RESOURCES

Season of Creation runs for the four Sundays in September – <http://seasonofcreation.com>

17-24 September

World Week of Peace in Palestine and Israel. Resources available from the World Council of Churches website: www.oikoumene.org/en

21 September

UN International Day of Peace – see resource in this mailing

24 September

Social Justice Sunday – see resource in this mailing

15-21 October

Anti-Poverty Week – see resource in this mailing

FINAL 2017 JUSTACT MAILING DATE

NOVEMBER 13

If you would like to spend a couple of hours in the company of socially minded people and help us compile and send off these mailings we'd love to hear from you!

Contact 9251 5271 or email jim@victas.uca.org.au

MAKE A DONATION

FULL NAME

CREDIT CARD

CHEQUE

Cheques payable to **Uniting Church In Australia**

ADDRESS

CARD #

NAME

PHONE

EXPIRES

MOBILE

A ONE-OFF DONATION OF

OR A REGULAR CONTRIBUTION OF

every 1/2/3/4/6/12 months (please circle) until further notice

EMAIL

SIGNATURE

Return to 130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne 3000

All information provided by you will managed in accordance with the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania's Privacy Policy.