

BDSJC Annual Report 2020

In 2020, members of the Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission (BDSJC) were: Bishop Paul Bird CSsR, Stacey Atkins, Tony Fitzgerald, Noel Gregory, Anthea Hinchey (Chair), Felicity Liston, Sr. Helen Nolen RSM, Jo Rix, Jim Ryan, Sue Searls, Rachel Smith (Executive Officer) and Fiona Tonkin (Minutes Secretary). The Commission also welcomed new member Andrew O'Flynn. In August, Jo Rix resigned from the Commission, as did Tony Fitzgerald in November. Both were informed and passionate advocates of social justice; their expertise and insights will be sorely missed.

The intent of the BDSJC is to assist the Bishop by promoting right relationships with God, each other and all of God's creation. A shared understanding of justice in the Scriptures and in Catholic Social Teaching helps the Commission identify when such relationships are broken. Mindful of this, the Commission began each of its four scheduled meetings with prayer and formation. Members were also encouraged in these meetings to highlight social justice issues and concerns, helping to promote action and shape the ongoing work of the Commission.

Traditionally, these meetings have provided the opportunity for the Commissioners to gather together in person. 2020 had also begun with plans for a number of our social justice initiatives to be promoted via group gatherings. A consequence of COVID-19 was that three of our meetings and some of our initiatives needed to be recontextualised to better suit the virtual environment.

A key responsibility of the BDSJC is to monitor, study and promote the resources and research prepared by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) and other relevant agencies. This year the Commission:

- promoted ACSJC materials and initiatives via school Religious Education Leader contacts, parish contacts and the Ballarat Diocese
- participated in regular and ongoing Zoom meetings with the ACSJC contacts group which has representatives from dioceses across Australia
- had one of our members network with groups from across Australia following the Australian Catholic Youth Festival which was held in Perth at the end of last year
- was represented at the Catholic Earthcare Convocation 2020.

The BDSJC is also represented on, and promotes the initiatives of a number of social justice committees:

- the Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH); committed to working towards the elimination of human trafficking
- the Vic-Tas Catholic Modern Slavery Taskforce; working against slavery and human trafficking and working to promote fair-trade endeavours.
- the Ballarat Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Network; responding to the needs of those on temporary visas during COVID-19 with food, financial assistance for utility bills and the acquisition of 28 computers for the use of refugee women and students to have access to education during COVID-19 work from home
- Catholic Earthcare Ballarat; discussing, planning and advocating how Australian Catholics and all people, can actively promote Care of Our Common Home (*Laudato Si – Pope Francis*).

A permanent fixture on the BDSJC calendar is the release of the annual Social Justice Statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. This year's, titled *To Live Life to the Full – Mental Health in Australia Today*, calls on faith communities, governments and each one of us to make mental health a priority. A responsibility of the Commission is to initiate and support activities that promote this Statement. In light of this:

- two Commission members attended the national launch of the Statement and shared back to the Commission
- 4 events were run for the launch of the Statement in the Ballarat Diocese, including a Mental Health webinar
- articles were written and provided for 'Our Diocesan Community' showcasing the Mental Health webinar and the Commission's flyer for mental health support during lockdown
- resources and information were disseminated amongst schools and parishes within the Diocese.

It is important that the BDSJC be both proactive and reactive to the changing needs within the Diocese. Tapping into and facilitating, as required, research and analysis of social justice issues in a Christian context, especially where these have a local or regional impact is another key responsibility of the Commission. Concerns for the environment and the impacts of climate change became a focus. The Commission:

- researched with Prof. Mark Diesendorf on climate change solutions
- began plans for a community forum for raising awareness about climate

change (due to COVID-19, this forum has been postponed)

- interviewed Ballarat MP Catherine King on climate change politics
- promoted the online petition in support of Zali Steggall's Private Members Bill, *Climate Change (National Framework for Adaptation and Mitigation) Bill 2020* amongst its networks, via eNews and its website.

Part of the role of the BDSJC is to prepare submissions and, after consultation with, and approval of the Bishop, make representations on behalf of the Diocese to government, politicians, public inquiries and other agencies concerned with public policy. In response to this:

- the Commission and Catholic Earthcare Ballarat sent a joint letter in support of Zali Steggall's Climate Change Bill to Members of the House of Representatives in the Diocese and to all Victorian Senators. A copy of the letter was also sent to the House Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy to which the Bill had been referred
- the Commission sent a further letter to the same Members of the House of Representatives and Senators objecting to the prosecutions of Bernard Collaery and Witness K for disclosing Australia's bugging of Timor Leste's cabinet office during negotiations on the Timor Sea oil and gas fields.

Copies of these letters and links to the online petitions can be accessed through eNews and links on the BDSJC website.

With 2020 drawing to a close, the Commission looks towards 2021 where it can continue to advocate for justice in light of the Catholic tradition.