



# Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission Annual Report 2021

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In 2021, members of the Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission (BDSJC) were: Bishop Paul Bird CSsR, Stacey Atkins, Noel Gregory, Anthea Hinchey (Chair), Felicity Liston, Sr. Helen Nolen RSM, Andrew O’Flynn, Jim Ryan, Sue Searls, Rachel Smith (Executive Officer) and Fiona Tonkin (Minutes Secretary). The Commission also welcomed new member Hannah Scullion, mid-year. In June, Noel Gregory, a member of the Commission for ten years, moved from the diocese and resigned from the Commission. Noel continues to be a committed and passionate advocate of social justice; his knowledge and drive will be sorely missed. At the end of the year, Rachel Smith also resigned from the Commission to resume full time teaching in a leadership position. Rachel consistently went above and beyond in her role as Executive Member, helping keep the Commission informed, organised and well represented in our social justice networks. Like Noel, her absence will be keenly felt. We wish them both well.

The role of the Commission is to support the Bishop in honouring right relationships between God and all of God’s creation by identifying and addressing issues of justice. This understanding of justice is formed through the study of Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching. Mindful of this, the Commission began each of its four meetings with prayer and formation. This time of prayer, study, discussion and personal reflection helped inform and guide the focus of the meeting that followed. The Commissioners were also encouraged to bring to each meeting issues of justice that the Commission could respond to.

A responsibility of the Commission is to encourage the development of a network of justice contacts and social justice groups locally (established), at parish or at regional level. The BDSJC continued to attend and promote the initiatives of several 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 - supporting several refugee families with food hampers, fresh vegetables and paying utility bills throughout COVID-19, advocating with the Government for an increase of Afghan refugee intake, in addition to giving permanent VISAs to those who are on Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas;
- Catholic Earthcare Ballarat - discussing, planning and advocating how Australian Catholics and all people can actively promote ecological justice;
- Australian Catholic Social Justice Council contacts gathering - representatives from dioceses across Australia gather, discuss and share social justice issues and initiatives.

While the disruptions of COVID-19 meant that the meetings were often virtual, the key responsibilities of the BDSJC remained the priority. This included promoting opportunities for educating the Catholic and wider community about the social teaching of the Catholic Church. This year the Commission:

- Shared material with schools, promoting the purchase of Fair-Trade Easter chocolate;
- Released material to support schools in setting up 'slavery free staff rooms';
- Organised and facilitated a guest speaker event for the ACRATH/Vic-Tas Taskforce with Professor Johannes Dumay (MacQuarie University), one of the authors of the research article 'Chocolate: A Very Sticky Problem'. Findings were shared with the Commission and will continue to inform actions on Fair Trade;
- Initiated an ecology calendars project in which students from Catholic primary schools across the diocese were invited to draw or paint the element of creation that they loved and appreciated most. The artworks were collected and showcased at the Religious Education Leaders conference and the BDSJC Climate Change Forum. The Commission voted and selected from these artworks to create a calendar. A copy of the calendar will be provided for all 64 Catholic schools for 2022.

Each year the Commission has the responsibility of initiating and supporting activities that promote the annual Social Justice Statement by the Australian Bishops. The Commission identified key messages from this year's Statement, titled *Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor*, and the following experts were invited to respond in a forum setting:

- Jeanette Morris: Acknowledgement of Country and Opening Prayer;
- Bishop Paul Bird: Introduce the Bishops Statement Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor;
- Dr Mark Diesendorf: Listening to and learning from the world – what the science is telling us with a response from Fr Barry Ryan;

- Dr Sandie Cornish: Listening and drawing wisdom from our own wells – responding to the *Cry of the Earth Cry of the Poor* with a response from Fr Barry Ryan;
- Vicki Clark and Sherry Balcombe: Listening to creation – a call to care for Country;
- Jacqui Remond: Caring for creation – watering the seeds of change.

The uncertainty of COVID restrictions and the recent embrace of technology provided the opportunity to pilot a new type of forum that invited participants to attend the forum through a Parish Hub or via the Zoom platform. Parish Hubs were formed in Ballarat, Colac, Hamilton, Mildura and Warrnambool. This proved an effective way of maximising the opportunity to attend and will be a way for the Commission to encourage future gatherings across the diocese.

Another responsibility 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, letters were sent to Peter Dutton (Minister for Home Affairs) and Alex Hawke (Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs) calling for more effective support in the transition of refugees from hotel detention. The Commission identified several ways that this support could be realised.

The Commission, and its members, are dedicated to giving prominence to right relationships between God and all of God's creation. Honouring these relationships is continual and ongoing. As 2021 draws to a close, the Commission looks forward to 2022 where it can continue this commitment of advocating for justice in light of the Catholic tradition.