



Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission Annual Report 2023

In 2023, the Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission (BDSJC) met four times during the year. Members were: Bishop Paul Bird CSsR, Dr Susan Crowe, Anthea Hinchey (Chair), Jillian Hogbin, Felicity Liston, Sr. Helen Nolen RSM, Jim Ryan, Michael Ryan, Hannah Scullion, Sue Searls and Fiona Tonkin (Minutes Secretary).

Felicity Liston and Hannah Scullion concluded their time on the Commission mid-year. Felicity has been a voice for the youth of the diocese on the Commission for some four years, contributing generously from her varied talents and from her insights into social justice. Hannah's engagement with the diocesan students at Australian Catholic University (ACU) and expertise in linking social justice initiatives to practical action added focus to the works of the Commission for two years. We wish them both well and thank them for their commitment to social justice. Following Hannah's resignation, Tanya Keogh, the Campus Pastoral Associate from the ACU joined the Commission in June. In November, Sarah Page joined as the Executive Member and liaison for the Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited (DOBCEL).

During 2022, the Commission spent time reflecting on its role in the Diocese and hopes for a just society where right relationships between God and all of God's creation are honoured. Through a process of prayer, discussion and reflection, a Vision and Mission Statement was developed to focus and guide the Commission's way forward. The Commission continued its self-reflection this year, by clarifying the means to achieve this Vision and Mission through further developing a Strategy and Aims of the quarterly meetings. This clarification will direct the future pathway of the Commission.

The Commission begins each meeting with a time of prayer and study for the members. This includes a reflection, with a particular mindfulness to making connections between Catholic Social Teaching, social justice issues and Jesus' ministry. The sessions this year focussed on:

- the Synodal Church and the Synodal process. This session was led by Bishop Paul who had recently returned from the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conference of Oceania in Fiji and guided us through the role of the Synod in the Church as a consultative approach that includes all the Church in bearing witness to the Gospel;

- the Referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament (prior to the vote). This session was led by Ms. Jeanette Morris, a First Nations woman working for the Catholic Education Office in this diocese. Jeanette invited us to reflect on the progress in understanding of Indigenous issues that has taken place in the last fifty or so years, and then to walk with her in understanding what the Referendum hoped to achieve in giving that Voice. We were encouraged to look at both sides of the issue;
- the Catholic Social Teaching principles of Preferential Option for the Poor, Human Dignity, Care for our Common Home, Subsidiarity and Participation, The Common Good and Solidarity. This was led by Jillian Hogbin, the Caritas coordinator for the diocese, who offered practical examples of how Caritas is helping make these principles a reality in different parts of the world;
- Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum* (Praise God). Dr Susan Crowe guided us through this encyclical which summarises a number of concerns, including developments in the world's temperature path, the Pope's fear of what will happen if we reach 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees of warming and his direct appeal to Governments to use their authority to meet real goals and act in a responsible manner to bring about change.

Acting with others towards justice, peace and care for all of God's creation is integral to the works of the Commission. In 2023, the BDSJC continued to promote the initiatives of several other social justice committees:

- Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Office for Justice, Ecology & Peace contacts gathering; representatives from dioceses across Australia gather, discuss and share social justice issues and initiatives;
- the Ballarat Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Network; a member of a nationwide organisation that campaigns to bring lasting change to policy and treatment of people seeking refuge and asylum in Australia. In particular, advocating for an increase of Afghan refugee intake and giving permanent Visas to those who are on Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas. While there is less demand for financial support compared with previous years, the Ballarat group continues to support local vulnerable refugees with food hampers, fresh vegetables, payment of utility bills and education courses;
- Caritas; the Catholic Church's international aid and development agency in Australia. It works alongside the most vulnerable, addressing the imbalance of power by including the people affected in the decisions impacting their lives;
- Catholic Earthcare Ballarat; discussing, planning and advocating how Australian Catholics and all people, can actively promote ecological justice in our society;

- Palm Sunday Justice and Freedom for Refugees Rally; a national annual event that gathers community groups, faith groups, unions and political organisations across Australia. These groups raise public awareness about the rights of refugees and Asylum Seekers and challenge the Australian Government on policies that are detrimental to the fundamental rights and mental health of those seeking sanctuary in this country;
- St Vincent de Paul Society; which is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. The Society assists its members in the day-to day work they undertake to be an effective force at all levels for the promotion of social justice in Australia.

An important role of the Commission is to initiate and support activities that promote the annual Social Justice Statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops within the Ballarat Diocese. This year's Statement – *Listen Learn Love: A New Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* was released in the months prior to the national Referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. As the Statement highlighted responses to First Nations people's issues, the Commission felt it important to address the Referendum in its response to the Statement. The Commission's strategy to promote this Statement was to package a series of presentations in digital format so that parish communities and individuals can access these resources at their convenience from the BDSJC website. The digital package created by the Commission took the following format:

- Acknowledgement of Country and Prayer by Jeanette Morris and Dr Susan Crowe;
- An excerpt from the Foreword from the National Launch of the Statement by John Lochowiak (Chair NATSICC) and Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB (President Australian Catholics Bishops Conference);
- A message from Bishop Paul Bird CSsR in response to the Statement;
- *Listen, Learn, Love*: a conversation between two Aboriginal Women of Faith about the Statement and their desire for a "Yes" vote in the Referendum by Vicki Clarke OAM and Sherry Balcombe;
- Reflections on the Referendum debate: a discussion exploring the viewpoints of 'Yes' and 'No' via a debate between Fr Frank Brennan SJ and Warren Mundine AO.

As 2023 draws to a close, members of the Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission look forward to 2024 where we can continue to find ways to advocate for our vision of "*a community in which all people live in right relationships, show respect, act justly and care for all God's creation*".