

# CLIMATE CHANGE

## A FOCUS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

Objective 5 of our Parish Pastoral Plan is to *reach out to those in need*. While we have a number of strong outreach ministries in the parish, one aspect of outreach we would like to further develop is that of social justice. The Pastoral Council (PPC) has decided to initially focus on three themes:

- Climate Change
- Indigenous Australians, and
- East Timor.

The issue of climate change is now receiving tremendous coverage in the media, but the attention is primarily in relation to its potential impact on the Australia economy. This article attempts to present information on the problem from the social justice perspective.

### Climate Change - an Issue of Social Justice

For a number of years the Catholic and other Christian churches, along with the World Council of Churches, have been highlighting climate change (global warming) as a serious issue of social justice. They have stressed that unless it receives urgent attention from the governments of the developed countries there could be dire consequences for millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region.

#### What is Climate Change?

It is now well accepted in scientific circles that carbon emissions from the use of fossil fuels are leading to increasing global temperatures. This, in turn, is causing melting of the polar ice caps and significant changes to our weather and eco-systems. People of industrialised nations, who are deriving the benefits from excessive use of energy, are creating an outcome that will impact disproportionately on the people of the under-developed countries. These are people who have contributed little to the cause of the problem and are least able to help themselves to reduce the impacts.

Furthermore, in developed countries like Australia it is the people of the current generation that are enjoying the benefits of excessive consumption, while the people of future generations (our children and grandchildren) will be left to wrestle with the consequences, such as water shortages, violent storms and sterilisation of farming lands due to increasing soil salinity.

Most scientists now believe that the rate of global warming is much faster than was previously predicted. People living in the low lying Pacific island states such as Kiribati and on the West Bengal Coast of India are already being displaced by rising sea levels. It is now widely accepted by scientists that, unless a substantial reduction in the use of fossil fuels is achieved within the next 20 years, the world's eco-system will be pushed beyond the point of no return.

Based on current populations, scientists have estimated that the ecological system can cope with carbon emissions of approximately 2 tonnes per person per annum. In the United States emissions levels are approximately 20 tonnes per person, in Australia – 17, in Europe - 10, in China – 2.7, in India – 1 and in the developing Asia countries – 0.5. Australia therefore rates, on a per capita basis, as one of worst polluting countries in the world. Our leaders dismiss this as a concern because we are a country with a low population. This is effectively saying that because we live in a country blessed with a low population and abundant resources, we should be allowed to live in the manner to which we have become accustomed and expect the poorer, overpopulated developing countries to remain in that state and support our over-consumption.

Countries such as China, Japan and South Korea have taken positive steps to reduce energy consumption, including ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and the establishment of targets to increase the proportion of energy generated from renewable sources, but Australia and the US have done little.

While the issue is now commanding significant political and public debate, our political leaders currently seem to be only driven by concern for the harm that may be caused for our domestic economy rather than recognition that our excesses will inevitably bring misery to the poorer countries in our region. During his recent visit, leading world economist, Sir Nicholas Stern, challenged Australia to cut its emissions by 30% by the year 2020 if it is to have any chance of meeting a 60% reduction by 2050, the level of response that scientists say is necessary to avoid dangerous climate change. Responding to that, our Prime Minister said “it is imperative that we do not take actions as a nation that puts us at an unfair disadvantage with the rest of the world”. He went on to say that he was not going to agree to any prescriptions “that are going to cost the jobs of Australian coalminers.”

## **Why is Climate Change a Social Justice Issue?**

We as Christians must strive to have the status of climate change elevated to a serious issue of social justice. In the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1-3) we are told that after creating the heavens, the sea, the earth and all it contains "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." We would have to wonder whether God would look at the world today, where a small minority has not only taken the majority of the fruits of creation, but is now consuming them in a manner that will reap destruction on the most vulnerable in the world, and still think that "it is very good."

Catholic social justice teaching is based on the principles of

- human dignity – every human being is made in the image of God,
- the common good – God intended that the gifts of creation be available to all
- subsidiary – the people or groups affected by decisions should have input to the decision-making process
- solidarity – we must commit ourselves to serve the common good.

Pope John Paul II proclaimed "As far as the church is concerned, the social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis for motivation for action". As a community and as individuals, we must take positive actions now to avert the victimisation of the millions of people of poorer nations who will be victims of the problems brought on by our excesses.

### **What can we do about it?**

As a community of Christ we can become advocates to leaders of Governments and corporations encourage them to implement actions that will reduce the causes of climate change, including:

- measures to prioritise energy conservation,
- the development of processes to generate renewable energy,
- programs to support environmental refugees,
- programs to alleviate the impacts of droughts, floods and violent storms.

We must pressure our Government to become a party to the Kyoto Protocol (which has already been ratified by over 150 other governments) and accept reduction targets for energy consumption.

As individuals we need to review our lifestyle and make our own contribution to the reduction in energy consumption. Actions we can take include:

- reduction in the use of private cars – couldn't we walk to the shops, the church and school or use public transport,
- use energy efficient light globes, turn off unnecessary lights and heating/cooling appliances,
- use a clothes line to dry washing, rather than a clothes dryer,
- buy local rather than imported produce to reduce transport, and
- reduce the use of packaging.

As our contribution to the "outreach" ministry of St Mark's we will endeavour to keep our parishioners well informed on issues such as climate change. You are encouraged to make lifestyle changes that will help alleviate its effects and to become advocates for change by discussing the issues with friends and neighbours and writing to your local member to pressure Governments into taking the action required to support our more vulnerable neighbours.

More information on this subject can be found on websites such as:

[www.caritas.org.au](http://www.caritas.org.au)

[www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au)

[www.faihtdoingjustice.com.au](http://www.faihtdoingjustice.com.au)

[www.columban.org.au](http://www.columban.org.au)

### **Would you like to learn more about climate change?**

The PPC is planning to hold a focus meeting on climate change. The intention is to have guest speakers with expertise in both the scientific and social justice aspects of the problem. Depending on the availability of speakers, the meeting will be held around June. Please watch the Bulletin for further information.

### **Would you like to be involved with Social Justice activities?**

If you have an interest in social justice and would like to be involved with matters such as the identification and researching of issues, planning of social justice activities for the parish, etc please contact John Pattenden on 97191911 or [jpattend@bigpond.net.au](mailto:jpattend@bigpond.net.au).

*(This article has been prepared by our Parish Pastoral Councillor John Pattenden)*