

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Mary Betz from the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland.

Hope for God's Reign in Aotearoa: The Realised and the Not-Yet

As we begin our Advent liturgical journey, the lectionary readings caution us to keep awake, to listen for the voice crying in the wilderness. The readings are full of the yearning for redemption, consolation and salvation. They look forward to the justice and peace of a new heaven and a new earth, the proclaiming of good news to the poor and release for those oppressed.

Two to three thousand years on from when the words of Isaiah, Paul and the evangelists were first recorded, those cautions, longings and hopes are still with us. This past year has been an easy one in which to become depressed and despairing about the issues which face our country and our world. But there are also glimpses of the good news of God's reign in the midst of the bad.

Inequality became a major concern within New Zealand as well as among nations. New Zealand ranks second in the OECD for the rate at which inequality has increased since the mid 1980s. The richest one percent of New Zealanders now own 16 percent of the country's wealth; the richest 10 percent own 50 percent of wealth, while the poorest 50 percent own just five percent (<http://www.inequality.org.nz/understand/>). Max Rashbrooke brought together economists and other social scientists for the analysis *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, published in June. In July, Nigel Latta's 'The New Haves and Have-Nots' was sober viewing (<http://tvnz.co.nz/nigel-latta/s1-ep4-video-6025283>).

Closely related to inequality is the issue of child and family poverty. One in four children in New Zealand grows up in poverty, a tragic and needless outcome addressed in July by the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission's 'Inequality: Its Effects on Children and Families: A Forum on Issues and Solutions.' On 6 Sept,

over 1,000 people marched with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in downtown Auckland in support of greater government action against poverty. A few days later, CPAG published a systematic analysis and policy suggestions in 'Our Children, Our Choice: Priorities for Policy' (<http://www.cpag.org.nz/resources-publications/publications/>). The report made recommendations in the areas of health, education, housing and income aimed at reducing child poverty.

One of the major contributors to poverty is the increasing lack of affordable housing. It is not being helped by the sale of existing state housing and the refusal of government to take responsibility for providing housing for many of those who can no longer pay market rates. Five thousand people are on the waiting lists for state housing, while thousands more are living in garages, camping grounds and even cars (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/259489/housing-nz-readied-for-sale-labour>).

Recent government housing reform has seen responsibility for determining eligibility for social housing moved from Housing NZ to Work and Income (Ministry of Social Development), which housing advocates privately say has been a nightmare. The move to turn over responsibility for social housing to public-private partnerships is perceived as a way of the government's washing its hands of a duty of care in the housing of its poorest constituents. Whether the partnerships with private companies and community organisations will increase the availability of low-rent housing remains to be seen. Provision of more affordable housing in general, especially for first home owners, became an election issue, with centre left parties vying to

offer the best promises for constructing homes affordable for people on low incomes. Alas, the election results were not in favour of the government building affordable homes.

As well as people described above who are chronically under-housed, there has been an increase in all homelessness over past years. Riding on a bus through downtown Auckland last month for the first time this year, I was horrified to see the number of people of all ages and ethnicities begging on the streets. In October Wellington mayor Cecilia Wade-Brown slept on the streets as a part of the Salvation Army's 14-hr sleep-in to mark World Homeless Day. Wade-Brown says that one in 120 New Zealanders is homeless. This is by a Statistics NZ definition that includes under-housing (80 percent) as well as those sleeping rough (20 percent). Her take on homelessness: 'I think cities and countries are defined by how well they actually take care of (their) most vulnerable people.' (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/256663/homelessness-'can-happen-to-anyone>).

Homelessness, although it can happen simply as a result of a series of difficulties like loss of job, is often related to poverty, addictions and subsequent violence and theft. Despite Catholic social teaching permitting persons in extreme necessity to take from the riches of others what they need (*Gaudium et Spes* 69), such taking is not looked upon as lawful by the courts. Nonetheless, a special 'homeless court' set up in Auckland in 2010 (New Beginnings) has had amazing results, with arrest rates dropping by two thirds and nights spent in hospital more than halved (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/242101/homeless-court-doing-much-better-than-expected>).

Some of those homeless who are particularly vulnerable are those just released from prison. The support NOT given to released prisoners is one of the major causes of recidivism. Nigel Latta's 'Behind Bars' noted that in Canada, 60 percent of prisoners were released into half-way house situations. By contrast, only 10 percent in New Zealand could go to an equivalent place which provided wrap-around social services. Such services include treatment for alcohol and drug addiction (90 percent of prisoners need this), assistance with housing, budgeting and community reintegration, as well as mental health issues (suffered by about 60 percent of prisoners).

(<http://tvnz.co.nz/nigel-latta/s1-ep5-video-6052810>).

On a recent visit to the women's prison in Wiri, our group was taken first to the mother/baby units and the units shared by prisoners within six months to a year of their release dates. The living areas were surrounded on two sides by bedrooms and bathroom, a living situation which reminded me of mature-student housing on a university campus. The soon-to-be-released prisoners were either on work-release or study programmes, as were many of the others in the low security area of the prison. Some work and training were provided within the prison itself – its laundry, gardens and food facilities being the main venues.

It was more sobering to walk into the high security block which was on lock-down at mid-afternoon. Prison officers were noticeably more tense. A view of an empty cell revealed a sparse fully-enclosed space with no view of outside or the common areas of the block. Few prisoners here had access to programmes, sufficient money for staff being unavailable.

While social issues dominated during the election campaign, environmental concerns were mostly ignored. Gas and oil exploration permits are open for bidding again, both on and off-shore. Resource Management Act changes will be revealed in mid-2015. And will our government look with any more interest at controlling carbon emissions now that major economies China and the US have finally made a first step forward? (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/world/asia/china-us-xi-obama-apec.html?_r=0) New Zealand will be a party at international climate negotiations this month in Lima, Peru. We can hope that the government may take action to reduce rather than continue to increase our country's carbon emissions (http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11352316).

Some realised hopes? Yes, in terms of promising changes in our justice and corrections systems, and in terms of the dedicated individuals and organisations researching issues and advocating for change. Let us pray this Advent for courage and perseverance, creativity and hope as we continue working for God's reign of justice and compassion, on earth as it is in heaven.