

Talking Cents

February 2017

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland 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 issue is contributed by Jean Brookes a member of the Anglican Social Justice Working Group.

You can't crush hope!

Dare we hope for peace based on justice with Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, changes in the political leadership in New Zealand and the slaughter of children, women and men in Syria? Dare we hope that the love we proclaimed at Christmas can re-energise our collective ability to respond to crises with justice in 2017?

Our understanding of God shows in our responses to crises. Just before Christmas 2016, scientific truth, religious scepticism and non-fundamentalist theologies combined to condemn claims that perceived sexual sin was connected with earthquakes. Meanwhile the question of God's response to the suffering of innocents became particularly focussed on the men, women and children being slaughtered in Aleppo and other besieged Syrian cities.

The week before Christmas 2016 the Archbishop of Canterbury referred to the situation in Syria when he spoke about forgiveness (<https://www.facebook.com/archbishopofcanterbury>). He asked, 'How can there be forgiveness for what is happening in Aleppo? How can there be forgiveness for the other things that are happening round the world?' He went on to say, 'This is about God "with us" - taking on the burden of everything we are not, and everything this world has wrong with it.' Later he spoke of justice: 'When there's been crime, great sin, great cruelty, it needs to go somewhere – that's what justice is. Justice says there must be a cost to wrong doing.....'

Bashar al-Assad became the President of Syria in 2000 following the thirty years of autocratic rule by his father that included the slaughter of 20,000 or more people in Hama in 1982. Bashar al-Assad imposed radical neo-liberal policies. Foreign investments went up from \$115 million in 2001 to \$1.6 billion in 2006. Public assets were transferred into privileged networks and corporations. Welfare facilities in villages and medium-sized cities such as Daraa and Hama were neglected. An inner circle benefited greatly from the development of a highly controlled corporatist state. Within ten years people below the poverty level rose from 11% to 33%, and 50% of the population existed on \$2 per day and the rising desire for political change in nearby countries was ignored by the Syrian regime (Robin Yassin-Kassab, *Leila Al-Shami-Burning Country-Syrians in revolution and War*-Pluto Press, 2016, pp 30-33 including Note 30).

In 2011 opposition to the increasingly authoritarian regime including its neo-liberal policies spread through the country with peaceful demonstrations, sit-ins, flash mobs and graffiti campaigns. Youth chants called for bread and freedom, while the elites mainly focussed on liberty and electoral reform. The regime reacted by trying to crush the protests with terror, torture and force. When the opposition movement found it could no longer protect its population in the free areas, it decided its only option lay in armed revolt.

I feel there are some similarities between the dreams and experiences of the early followers of Jesus of Nazareth and the supporters of the 2011 Syrian revolution, especially in Aleppo in 2017.

Some members of the early Jerusalem Christian community committed themselves to an egalitarian model that re-distributed wealth according to need (Acts 2:27-34). A climatic moment for Christians and Jews alike was the horrific 72AD/CE siege of Jerusalem and its destruction. Many of those who survived the catastrophe were scattered to other parts of the Roman Empire where they were anything but safe.

The Syrian revolutionary movement also modelled a grass-roots socio-economic model as part of its dream of fullness of life for all. It built up local structures into Co-ordinating Committees, autonomous organisations in urban and rural areas that were no longer under the control of the Assad regime. Some became viable alternative systems with responsibilities that included health, welfare and education.

In slightly different ways the followers of Jesus and the people of the Syrian revolution felt let down; abandoned and forgotten. 'No-one is coming to help us.' 'We only have you O God/Allah.' Over time the early followers of Jesus realised he would not be coming back soon to finish the work of salvation. In Eastern Aleppo, the civil population waited in vain for the world to rescue them from the forces of the Syrian regime and its allies including a wide range of volatile foreign militias.

The Syrian revolution dreamt of bread, love, freedom, dignity and justice and has major overlaps with Jesus' dream of God's reign of justice and peace with flourishing humanity and creation. So, who are we to say the dream of the Syrian revolution is over (<http://www.syriauk.org/p/bbg-page.html>)? And how might we work for peace with justice for other people who currently suffer political and socio-economic oppression? 2016 offered us some clues.

In April 2016 a Conference was held in Rome called *Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding and commitment to Nonviolence*. It was co-hosted by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace together with Pax Christi International. The world-wide 85 participants were non-violence and peace-making 'practitioners'. They had seen colleagues, family members and friends, murdered, imprisoned, tortured, and some had suffered violence themselves.

Pope Francis encouraged discussion on 'revitalising the tools of non-violence and of active non-violence in particular...' The final report called for a shift to a 'just peace' approach based on Gospel non-violence by committing to human dignity and thriving relationships in order to prevent, defuse, and heal the damage of violent conflict. It commented that peace is not the absence of conflict or war but the new vision of 'shalom', just peace, where we take care of the earth, stop killing people and rebuild a world where all people have enough food and employment and respect as persons (<http://www.paceebene.org/2016/04/14.vatican-conference-on-nonviolence>). The Pope has been asked to write an Encyclical on the Conference findings.

We are challenged to turn away from the doctrine of just war and search for just peace. We will need to use our full collective capacity to examine philosophies, theologies, Biblical themes and ethical approaches, to critique ideologies and party policies, and to honour and support indigenous peoples in this peace-making ministry of truth and reconciliation. Two current situations in Tamaki-Makaurau, Auckland, carry many of the imposed policies that characterise the story of the civil population of Syria and invite our support.

The Tamaki Regeneration Company is a joint central government and Auckland Council structure that has promoted urban renewal through the development of 'mixed' communities in the Glenn Innes suburb of Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland.. Vanessa Cole explored imposed 'mixed' community development models internationally in "*We shall not be moved*", *Community Displacement and Dissensus in Glen Innes, Tamaki Makaurau*, University of Auckland, 2015. This Masters thesis concluded that the Glen Innes experience has shown this model is an uncontested process based on manufactured unity, and a false belief that inequality is the fault of the individual (Abstract p ii). Abby Cunnane, Charlotte Huddlestone, Sakiko Sugawa, Mary N.Taylor (Co- Editors) put the Tamaki story in a wider context in *Co-Revolutionary Praxis: Accompaniment as a strategy for working together*, AUT, 2015 (www.stpaulst.aut.ac.nz). The authors suggest ways to support dissidents and distinguishes between social practice and praxis (p14 and pp 99-111).

Similarly, the people of Ihumatao, Mangere and their supporters have reminded us of the illegal confiscation of land in Tamaki Makaurau and the Northern Waikato by Governor Grey in 1863. Their campaign (Save Our Unique Landscape Campaign-SOUL) opposes the Auckland Council designation of the Special Housing Area (SHA) on land next to the Stonefields, and the sale of 33 hectares to Fletcher Residential for development (info@protectihumatao.org.nz). They have created a wide range of imaginative actions.

A time of crisis can be a time for long-term change to begin. As 2017 unfolds we can keep hope alive by praying for great wisdom for ourselves as we respond collectively to the cries of the marginalised locally and internationally.