

Talking Cents

October 2013

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 Peter Bargh, from the Social Justice Council of the Diocese of Auckland.

Justice and Peace Now!

Widespread poverty. Rampant corruption. Significant civil strife. These are hallmarks of many nations, including such head-line grabbing ones as Egypt and Syria. They are also characteristics of the Pacific archipelago nation of the Philippines.

It was to the cry of “justice and peace now!” that young Christians from across Asia-Pacific gathered in Manila from August 24 – September 5, first for a ‘Human Rights Justice and Peace’ workshop and then for the Asia-Pacific Youth and Students Gathering. We came together from as far afield as Pakistan and Japan, Mongolia and New Zealand.

For the aforementioned reasons alone the Philippines was a prime location for gatherings so themed. The opportunity to celebrate significant events in the life of local ecumenical and youth organisations also played a part. The chance to prepare and inform an Asia-Pacific youth voice for the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches which convenes in Busan, South Korea, on the 30th of this month – also with a focus on justice and peace – was another a major factor in the timing of the youth gatherings.

The people of the Philippines have a proud history of standing up against injustice. During our time there, on their National Heroes’ Day, August 26, 2013, the “Million People March” took place in Manila to protest against the “Pork Barrel Scam”. Besides this main event similar protests were held elsewhere in the Philippines as well as in Filipino communities abroad.

The “Pork Barrel” refers to what is currently called the Priority Development Assistance Fund. This is unassigned government funding, totalling billions of Philippine pesos annually, which can be spent at the discretion of individual law-makers. Congressional Representatives, Senators

and the President all receive different amounts to spend at their discretion. Despite ongoing criticism of the scheme since its inception in 1990 it was the recent scandal where the government was defrauded an estimated 10 billion Philippine peso (~NZD280 million) which proved to be the catalyst that pushed the people to take action.

Increasing revelations about the scam provoked the people’s outrage which, in turn, led to the demonstrations and eventual arrest of one of the scam masterminds. The lack of accountability around this fund and other similar ones, including the presidential ‘P1 trillion pork barrel...or lump-sum funds that could only be released at his discretion,’ had long concerned Filipinos before this scandal.¹

Often these discretionary funds are used in public-private partnerships. These projects lead to increased privatization which come hand-in-hand with increased foreign debts and less Filipino control over domestic affairs. This is predominantly happening with infrastructure projects although similar effects are being felt across society.

Understandably a particular concern of Filipino youth, and one that was echoed by delegates from across Asia-Pacific, was the commercialisation of education. The Philippine education system has endured one setback after another. The youth gatherings chastised current Philippine educational policy as ‘colonial, commercialized and fascist.’² This situation was similar for several of the other Asia-Pacific countries represented, with many concerned that their education systems were being shaped to suit the needs of global partners rather than their own people.

¹<http://wscfna.org/sites/default/files/HRJP%202013%20Statement.pdf>

² Ibid.

The effects of commercialisation are more subtle in New Zealand's tertiary education system which is dominated by publicly funded and run institutions. Related aspects of the neoliberal agenda can be seen here, however, as the pursuit of 'economic advancement' has supplanted the broader aims of 'social, human, scientific, and economic progress.'³ Increased tuition costs and changes to student loans and allowances have also lessened the availability of tertiary education in New Zealand. Across Asia-Pacific the rising costs of education and increased focus on "productive" areas of tertiary education have seen education's role as liberator become increasingly marginalised.

Other social justice issues across Asia-Pacific included: poverty; ecology and climate; militarization; housing; indigenous rights; and, gender. Obviously these all manifested themselves differently depending on the context across Asia-Pacific. Two examples of this can be seen with poverty and militarization. In New Zealand poverty is relative as opposed to absolute as it can be in the Philippines. Increased militarization in Asia-Pacific, as a result of the US pivot – a shift of focus and military resources to the region – can weigh heavily on nations such as the Philippines whilst other nations seek to support and exploit this shift at a minimum cost to them.

Furthermore, the young people recognised the limited role churches had played in proclaiming alternative political and economic models which would better reflect the Kingdom of God. The youth voice was, however, far from pessimistic. Youth gatherings were attentive to the upcoming WCC Assembly and the attendees recognised the importance a strong ecumenical voice could have in working for justice and peace. With the support of church leaders the young people affirmed their important and prophetic role as 'seeds of hope, catalysts of genuine and lasting peace that is based on justice.'⁴

The significance of this statement should be appreciated in the light of WCC's *Together*

³ <http://teu.ac.nz/2012/03/when-the-government-steers-the-market/>

⁴ http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/copy_of_StatementASYG2013.pdf

Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes. This document is the proposal for a new WCC Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism. It consists of 112 paragraphs; only one of which addresses young people.⁵

This is why, having recognised and explored both social problems as well as projects which sought to bring life, the young people invited their churches 'to come out from their comfort zones of conservatism and reactionary tendencies and go out to the streets where the people struggle for life and dignity.'⁶ This is not too dissimilar from the calls being made by Pope Francis for Roman Catholic clergy to 'to spend more time meeting ordinary people and preaching the Gospel, and less time on bureaucracy.'⁷ As we enter October and remember the Francis for whom the current Pope is named this message to live Gospel lives and live them simply is especially timely!

There are signs of the Church being proactive however and these are things to celebrate. In the Philippines often these projects take on a far more radical edge than those in New Zealand. That does not mean there are not things to celebrate here. The moves made by a number of New Zealand Anglican dioceses to divest from fossil fuels is one of these things.⁸ Australian churches have already made moves to this effect and other New Zealand churches, companies and groups watched these moves with interest.

It is a prerogative of the young to be idealists, and this is doubly so for young Christians! Being hope-filled, however, is not exclusive to young people. With the WCC Assembly almost upon us and with the gifts of new life which spring brings present among us may we all find it in us to join in the call 'justice and peace now!'

⁵ http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes#_edn28 Paragraph 72.

⁶ http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/copy_of_StatementASYG2013.pdf

⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/the-pope/10320928/Pope-Francis-Catholic-Church-could-fall-like-a-house-of-cards.html>

⁸ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11121968