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‘LET THEM IN!’

Exactly twelve months ago, our feature article ‘Refugees and Human Rights’ cited figures from the UN High Commission for Refugees of the number of persons in its care. There were 33.9 million such people globally, of whom 14.7 m. were internally displaced, 10.5 m. were refugees, 3.5 m. were stateless, 3.1 m. were returnees who still needed help, and 2.1 m. were asylum seekers and other ‘persons of concern’. There were 3.5 million refugees in Asia and a similar number of refugees and asylum seekers in Africa.

Looking at the current figures on the UNHCR’s website, it appears that any successes in resettlement have been largely outweighed by new arrivals from existing or more recent trouble spots. In Asia, the dominantly Afghan refugee population has been joined by Rohingyas from Myanmar, most of whom are now stateless persons. Meanwhile, new conflicts in Mali and South Sudan have added to the ranks of refugees in Africa.

The biggest change, of course, has been in Europe, where we have witnessed a ‘human wave’ of asylum seekers coming from the east and across the Mediterranean. Some 500,000 people have arrived so far this year, significantly more than in the whole of 2014. We have seen heartbreaking coverage of people drowning when overloaded boats capsize, suffocating in packed semi-trailers and injuring themselves while trying to climb over barbed-wire border fences. We even hear of people trying to walk to the UK through the Channel Tunnel and we wonder: “Just how desperate *are* these people?”

Under the European Union’s policy, known as the Schengen Convention, asylum seekers are required to register in the country they first arrive in – but this has overwhelmed the facilities in Greece and Italy, so people have been trying to get to northern countries – principally Germany – where they believe they will be allowed to live and work. Balkan countries like Serbia and Croatia have been only too happy to speed them on their way, causing Hungary to build fences along its southern borders to keep them out. Those who did get there went through the same ‘pass the parcel’ game, though they did get a warm welcome in Austria.

The majority of these asylum seekers are from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, though the ones coming from Libya are generally not natives of that country. Some are from other African countries, while others were guest workers in Libya who had to flee the chaos that has ensued since that country was divided by contending regimes in Tripoli and Benghazi. It is ironic that all four of those countries are places that the US and other Western countries attempted to liberate from dictatorial regimes. However well intentioned (if that’s the right word) these actions were, their outcomes clearly demonstrate how risky it can be to intervene in places that lack a strong sense of national identity. (That may not apply to Syria, however.)

While Germany avers that it has the resources to accommodate an incredible 800,000 migrants by the end of the year, many poorer countries in Southern and Eastern Europe insist that unemployment among their own citizens is too high for them to take any newcomers. There have been public protests in Hungary and the Czech Republic, as well as unhelpful statements from the Croatian government about “defending Christian Europe”, and anti-immigration parties have gained ground in Austria and Sweden.

However, an unsigned editorial in *The Economist* of 29 August provides a number of perspectives that are rarely heard amidst all the special pleading and xenophobia. It notes that 270,000 asylum seekers amount to one for every 1900 European residents and that there are more like 4 million Syrian refugees living (mostly in camps) in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Many of the new refugees are coming from there now because the camps are overcrowded and under-resourced; further, there is little prospect of them being able to return to their homes any time soon.

Unfortunately, this has led some people to argue that these new arrivals are not “genuine” refugees coming in fear for their lives, as they were perfectly safe where they were. But *The Economist* argues that Europe actually needs these very people:

“Europe’s labour force is ageing and will soon begin to shrink. ... Immigrants, including asylum-seekers, are typically young and eager to work. ... People who cross deserts and stormy seas to get to Europe are unlikely to be slackers when they arrive. On the contrary, studies find that immigrants around the world are more likely to start businesses than the native-born and less likely to commit serious crimes, and that they are net contributors to the public purse.

“The fear that they will poach jobs or drag down local wages is also misplaced. Because they bring complementary skills, ideas and connections, they tend to raise the wages of the native-born.... Jobs keep young men out of trouble. In the workplace, migrants have to rub along with locals and learn their customs, and vice versa. Let them in. Let them earn.”

Optimistic as that may sound, the reactions around the world were quite encouraging. Finland, whose population is only 5 million, had agreed to accept 30,000 and its prime minister even offered his own home. The US said it will accept 100,000 per year – but only in 2017. The rich Gulf states and Japan have pledged impressive sums for the camps, while accepting few refugees except as workers.

As one of his last acts as prime minister, Tony Abbott, said we would take 3000 from Europe but at the expense of refugees from other places. He relented under pressure but that revealed a great hole in the claim that Australia has the most generous refugee policy in the world. It turns out that we have spent a lot of money resettling refugees into third countries while accepting just 11,600 last year.

[On 11 September 2015, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee President and CEO Bill Schulz and Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales issued this joint statement:

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist Association remain gravely concerned about the global refugee crisis and are committed to taking action. That's why today we're announcing two new initiatives: A special UUSC-UUA Refugee Crisis Fund, with the goal of raising \$250,000 over the next 15 days. A petition drive to pressure the Obama administration to substantially raise the number of refugees admitted into the United States to 200,000. Donations to our UUSC-UUA Refugee Crisis Fund will go directly to our partners operating on the ground in countries receiving refugees. Our work will focus on ensuring the safe passage of refugees seeking safety and helping refugees access their rights in host countries.

Raising the general refugee admission ceiling to accommodate the growing number of people seeking asylum from Syria and other war-torn countries is a simple policy change that will have a huge impact. Right now, 11 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes after four years of civil war. Worldwide, an estimated 60 million people have been displaced, leading to the largest crisis of forced displacement since World War II. The United States must step up as a leader in aiding these vulnerable people. It is our moral imperative to act during this tragedy, and the UUA and UUSC will continue to respond in the coming weeks and months. The UUA and UUSC have a long history of aiding people who are fleeing violence and persecution – a history rooted in helping refugees fleeing Nazi oppression during World War II. Today, we are building on that tradition.

See next page for a similar appeal from the Hungarian Unitarian Church.]



ICUU NEWS

Appeal from the Hungarian Unitarian Church

Travel Opportunities



The Hungarian Unitarian Church issued this appeal on 10 September:

Dear Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist Friends all over the World

Many of you are aware of the fact that European Union and especially Hungary are facing an extraordinary migration flow. We, as leaders of the District in Hungary of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, consider that it is an urgent task to help all those refugees in need.

We are a relatively small religious organization with limited volunteers capacity and financial resources; therefore, we cannot create and organize our charity program by ourselves. We were, however, one of the founders of Hungarian Interchurch Aid 25 years ago, and we have supported and participated in their projects ever since.

Hungarian Interchurch Aid is a professional aid agency of Protestant background, with several national and international projects. According to their description, they participate in the following relief work: psycho-social services for children and assistance to reception centers in the form of children's clothing and toys, diapers, baby food, blankets, towels, non-perishable food and hygienic items, etc., to make the migrants' conditions more humane.

If you are able and willing to support these charity services, please send us your donations. We have made a special agreement with Hungarian Interchurch Aid to transfer this help to their refugee projects.

Donations may be sent via the online link in the appeal notice on the ICUU's homepage at: www.icuu.net.

[It has been a bit confusing since the Unitarian Church of Hungary merged with its Transylvanian counterpart a year ago to become the Hungarian Unitarian Church. Both branches have separate administrations and headquarters but the reason for the merger was that most of the Unitarians in Romania are ethnic Hungarians, known as *Székely*. The Hungarian branch has a history of assisting refugees since the late 1980s, when the Ceausescu regime in Romania stepped up its assimilation policy in Transylvania and a sizeable number of *Székely* (mostly Unitarians) migrated to Hungary.]

Those with an inclination to travel with fellow Unitarians from elsewhere in the world should note that the UU Partnership Church Council will be running its next budget tour of Transylvania over 07–14 May 2016. This will take in the historical Unitarian landmarks of Kolozsvár, Torda, Mészkő, Gyulafehérvár and Déva, as well as the 13th Century castle at Vajdahunyad, the Saxon fortress church at Biertan and the medieval citadel in Segesvár. You will also visit the frescoed Unitarian churches of Szekelyderz and Karacsonfalva, the medieval walled city of Segesvár and the Saxon fortress church at Biertan. (Szekelyderz, Segesvár and Biertan are all UNESCO World Heritage sites).

As usual, there will also be a pre-tour of Budapest on 04–07 May and a post-tour on 19–24 May of the Maramureş region on the border with Ukraine, where four of the most famous painted monasteries are located in Voroneţ, Humor, Moldoviţa, and Suceaviţa, all of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites. But be sure to book quickly because registrations for all of these tours close on 14 January 2016. The website to book through is: www.uupcc.org (then click the 'Pilgrimages' tab on the home page). There you will also find a hiking tour of Transylvania scheduled for August, which is definitely not for the faint of heart – but we'll tell you about that in the next issue.

It would be a good idea if would-be-travellers would check that website periodically, as already the deadlines for their tours of India (30 November) and the Philippines (01 December) are imminent. They should also see: www.transcendalisttours.com for their annual tours of Southern Italy and Sicily.

THE ALTAR OF PLUTO

By Rev. Peter Ferguson

It is indeed an honour to address this Conference on Social Justice. At the close of his book, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*, Raymond Holt warned that “as later generations painfully take up the work of striving to create a society in which the head is held high and the mind is free, they will wonder why those who came before them lost their nerve, and threw away the gains of centuries”.

Certainly it appears that Australia has frittered away many of the economic gains that Raymond Holt alluded to. Australia is second only to the USA in the race for individual wealth where the rich nearly always get richer to the detriment of everyone else. Australia’s peak welfare body, ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Services), reports that as of June this year the inequality between the richest and the poorest has actually widened, despite Australia’s run of a quarter of a century without a recession. The richest 20% now earn around five times as much as those in the bottom 20%. Dr Cassandra Goldie, Chief Executive of the report, pointed out that: “The richest 20% saw their pay packets go up by 72% over the last 20 years, compared to a 16% rise for the bottom 10%”.

Recently the International Monetary Fund (IMF) alerted the Australian Government that, if it is serious about economic growth, concentration of income and wealth at the top is bad for the economy. The wages growth for the bottom has largely been through longer working hours, but at the top it’s been a straight up increase in pay. She says, “We know that structures like negative gearing, capital gains arrangements, superannuation tax concessions, the tax loopholes that enable people to structure their financial arrangements at the higher end to minimise their effective tax into the general revenue, is a big problem for us”.

Professor Peter Whiteford of the Australian National University points out that the 20% of Australian households with the highest disposable income are now about five times better off than the poorest 20%. “So what caused this change? The macro explanations are globalisation which undercuts wages in rich countries because working class jobs are exported; the other is that those whose education has enabled them to work with new technologies have benefited more.” Andrew Leigh, one of Australia’s foremost academic economists, blames “the collapse of trade unions from half of the workforce to less than 20% and cuts in the top tax rates that have allowed the wealthy to keep more of their income.” Richard Denniss of the Australian Institute agrees, but blames the neo-liberal economic theories that set out to increase inequality: “Something must be done about the superannuation system, which delivers huge tax-free returns to the richest among us, as well as the capital gains regimes that are inflating the real estate bubble.”

Inequality between those who have the most and those who have the least is rising in Australia and New Zealand. We are among the wealthiest countries in the world, but there are many people and communities who are falling behind. For instance, the minimum wage and unemployment benefits have failed to keep pace with the rise in average earnings, resulting in a divergence between low income earners and the average employed Australian. Until 30 years or so ago, New Zealand was one of the most egalitarian countries in the world although that equality didn’t extend to the Maori communities. But from the mid-80s, the gap between the rich and the rest increased faster in New Zealand than anywhere else in the developed world. In that time, the average annual income of the top 1% has more than doubled from NZ\$158,000 to NZ\$337,000. By contrast the average disposable income for someone in the bottom 10% is lower now than in the 1980s. The top 1% of adults own three times as much of New Zealand’s wealth as the entire lower half put together!

So what can we do about it? The notion of social justice doesn’t come to us naturally. After all, we are animals. And our primary focus is the same as that for all other species – which is self-preservation. Social justice is learned; it is something that is taught. It is a higher calling than our animal instincts dictate. Like all, we defend our territory, our tribe, our young, and if we have the power, we extend our range of wealth even if it disadvantages other individuals and groups. There is no inborn sense of some greater good.

Moving on to asylum seekers, Australia is the only country in the world to mandate strict enforcement and detention. In his essay, ‘Why Australia hates Asylum Seekers’, Christos Tsiolkas writes: “More than 85% of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat are found to be genuine refugees, yet successive Australian governments continue to demonise them, we lock them up and stand idly by as they slowly go crazy or harm themselves.” We also refuse journalists the right to speak to them or name them. We farm them off to our impoverished, underdeveloped neighbours rather than construct a humane and efficient system to process their claims for asylum.

Despite being one of the wealthiest nations, the present Federal Government has slashed the amount of foreign aid to just 0.3% of its gross domestic income – 32 cents for every \$100. Aid to African nations has been cut by 70%.

We don't have to look very far to see that historically the more powerful inflict their will on those who are weaker than we are. That is the shared history of Australia and New Zealand. We disguise the reality by saying that our countries were "discovered". The truth is both Australia and New Zealand were already taken and occupied when our European ancestors stumbled on these lands. Over time the natives' land was taken from them and we claimed it as ours.

The immorality of the actions of the past can be seen today in virtually every corner of Australasia. The moral test of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. This is not a religious concept, but a secular one. For a nation to be healthy it must enjoy the cooperation of all its citizens. Our countries, Australia and New Zealand, cannot be happy nations when an elite few do very well and many are struggling to make it. It belongs to our common sense that we ensure that our less well-off are treated justly, not only for their sakes but also for our own and for our children's.

The over-representation of Aborigines in prison is possibly the ugliest and most urgent issue facing Australia. We should all be shocked by the statistics showing a 57% rise in incarceration rates among indigenous men, women and children over the past 15 years. Nationally, Aboriginal Australians are fifteen times more likely to be jailed than non-indigenous Australians. More than half of all Australians in juvenile detention are Aboriginal. The recidivism rate is 58%; 10-17 year olds are 24 times more likely to be jailed.

It is an easy option for the various State governments to be tough on crime – it gets lots of votes! It also gets prisons crammed beyond capacity with an extraordinary number of repeat offenders. Our prisons have become schools for crime especially when the inmates are impressionable teenagers and young men and women. The cost of imprisonment in Australia and New Zealand works out at about \$100,000 per inmate per annum. It seems that much of the money spent on imprisonment could be used for rehabilitation and better still addressing the causes which are low levels of education, poor employment opportunities, inadequate housing, endemic racism and most important perhaps exposure to abuse and violence in early childhood.

In New Zealand the prison population has doubled in the past twenty years and half of all prisoners are Maori, even though they make up less than 15% of the population. Similar to the Australian Aborigines, the Maori problems have their roots in soaring rates of child poverty, school drop-out, unemployment and family breakdown. In Maori society, just about every young person has a relative who is locked up. The rates of recidivism are sky-high, with half of the offenders returning within two years of their release. Maoris are less likely to receive cautions or bail, less likely to have good legal representation, and so on. At every stage in the justice system, the outcomes for Maoris are more severe than those for the Pakehas. Why has social justice for the First Peoples been thrown into the too hard basket?

Another area of human rights has to do with our two million Pacific Island neighbours who face the prospect of displacement by rising sea levels as a result of climate change. At this present time, however, international law makes no provision to cover people whose homelands become uninhabitable. About two years ago, the application by Loane Teitiota from Kiribati for refugee status was thrown out by the High Court of New Zealand, which ruled that refugee status must be based solely on the need for protection from political or other forms of persecution. No doubt, if his argument had prevailed, it would have carried huge implications for the millions of people who will be displaced in the coming generations.

Perhaps the Unitarian–Universalists of Australia and New Zealand could work together to alter the scope of the international refugee conventions so that these people can be protected. If they are not refugees, then what are they? This climate change and ocean rising is no longer an 'if'. It is already too late to keep these islands above sea level. Studies show that the impacts of carbon dioxide and methane gases are essentially locked in for the next 1000 years. Some experts believe that Australia and New Zealand are the Islanders' best hope.

It's actually not surprising that the effects of climate change have led to a growing sense of outrage in developing nations, many of which have contributed little to the pollution that is linked to rising temperatures and sea levels but will suffer the most from the consequences. Bangladesh's leading climate scientist, Atiq Rahman, says: "It's a matter of global justice. These migrants should have the right to move to the countries from which all these greenhouse gases are coming. Millions should be able to go to the United States." It is estimated that as many as 50 million Bangladeshis will flee the country by 2050 if sea levels rise as expected.

Some time ago, an article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* warned that “Aboriginal communities in the far north will be among the hardest hit by the effects of climate change, with higher rates of disease such as dengue fever and bacterial diarrhoea. Elevated temperatures and severe heat waves will also become a major problem as the elderly with inadequate facilities cope with radically changing conditions.”

Unitarianism evolved from Christianity and has long been excluded from Councils of Churches for its heretical non-Trinitarian views. Another less well known Unitarian heresy is the affirmation in its Seven Principles that we humans are simply a part of the interdependent web of existence. We do not believe we have been created in the image of God. This earth is our only home and few of us believe in some kind of post-mortem existence. Perhaps this is the reason why we are several shades of green and care about Mother Earth.

A prime example is the Great Barrier Reef, which is under threat from climate change, water catchment pollution as well as coastal developments as the human population expands. Overpopulating Australia and New Zealand with humans is part of the ongoing discussion among our churches and fellowships. Since European settlement, our land animals have been wiped out at the rate of one to two species per decade.

The final part of this address asks the question: Could we be moving towards plutocracy; i.e. rule by the rich and powerful? Certainly, when we look at the statistics it does seem that way. The gap between the haves and have-nots is greater now than it was during the Great Depression, 80 years ago. The seven richest Australians hold more wealth and assets than the 1.73 million in the bottom 20% of the population.

In August this year, the *Washington Post* ran an article reporting that 65% of the richest people in Australia had amassed their wealth via political connections rather than via innovative businesses. According to the quoted research, Australian residents are rewarded for their political connections about as much as their counterparts in Indonesia, India and Colombia in South America, which countries offer the biggest rewards. Responding to this article, Paul Frijters, Professor of Economics at the University of Queensland, and Gigi Foster, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of NSW, wrote:

“Research reveals a huge proportion of Australia’s richest people amass their wealth via political connections rather than innovative businesses which is helping them at the expense of everyone else. Is Australia really such a plutocracy? Our own research, using differing empirical methods, agrees with the conclusions reported in the *Washington Post*. In fact, we put the figure closer to 80%, making Australia potentially on a par with Colombia. This 80% of the wealthiest Australians have made their fortunes in property, mining, banking, superannuation and finance generally – all heavily regulated industries in which fortunes can be made by getting favourable property re-zonings, planning law exemptions, mining concessions, labour law exemptions, money creation powers and so on. The end result is a few who get special favours, and a vast majority who are kept poorer and less educated than they should be. The plutocrats are still winning, on both sides of politics. Seeing what should be done is not the hard bit. The hard bit is the politics. Solutions, like those suggested will be bitterly resisted by the plutocrats who personally gain so much from keeping the population ignorant of their parasitic feastings.”

In contemporary Christianity the highest ideals are associated with God. Many of us find the connotations of supernatural realms more awkward these days. It makes us feel uncomfortable. But once the mythical and metaphysical phrases are translated into ordinary language, they can be useful. In the religious tradition, the gods represent the values that determine so much of our behaviour. And we ask are they worth serving?

Certainly not Pluto, the god of economic riches. Worshipping at the altar of Pluto can hinder us in the quest to be more fully human and living a kind and generous life. I have been a minister for 55 years and have conducted thousands of funeral services. Never once have I heard a deceased person being praised for their wealth and material acquisitions. The eulogies are always about love, generosity and compassion.

We have named our species ‘homo sapiens’ meaning ‘man the wise’, but a life dedicated to the pursuit of wealth as the highest value is entirely unwise and downright foolish. Hear the paraphrased words of Jesus Christ:

“A nation’s life does not consist in the abundance of its resources and riches”

“For what shall it profit an individual or a nation to gain the whole world and lose its soul?”

These words are not an appeal to our easy instincts but to the better angels of our nature – compassion, fairness and empathy for the poor. I need to mention that Pluto was not only the god of riches but also of death. So, let us enjoy this Conference as we renew our commitment to justice and, in Ray Holt's words, "strive to create a society in which all of us can hold our heads up high and have minds that are free."

[Rev. Ferguson, past President of ANZUUA and minister of the Perth Unitarians, gave this address at the beginning of the 2015 Conference in Melbourne. It followed the address below by Rev. John Clifford, the new President of the UK General Assembly.]

OPENING ADDRESS

First I'd like to say how pleased I am to be able to bring members of the Australia New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association my official Greetings as President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches; an umbrella organisation which comprises congregations, District Associations, and societies linked by both formal democratic structures and overlapping personal relationships to form a faith community with a difference – where our value as members does not lie in our support for particular beliefs imposed either by the strong or the many. Our basis of unity is mutual support in search, not in answers.

The President's Medallion has 'Freedom', 'Reason', and 'Tolerance' inscribed on it, a traditional formulation that describes not beliefs but values that bring individuals together in respect and creative endeavour. In our collective experience and its expression, our living heritage not only permits but encourages each of us to discover for ourselves our direction in life. We do not do this in a vacuum; we learn from each other and we even challenge each other in love where necessary. We do not pass our heritage on unchanged from one generation to another in faithful preservation. We share our values; we live out our values; we add our reflections and insights into the common heritage; at our best we are open to the insights of others, even those outside our community. Toleration is based on respect for another's freedom. Freedom is based on bringing reason into questions of faith and spiritual practice. And Reason is linked with passion and compassion as we attempt to live our lives in harmony with our divine potential.

Each GA President is different and, in my ambassadorial role, I have been bringing encouragement to individuals and groups to live our heritage creatively and practically. We humans are tied to this World, which we are polluting and overheating as if tomorrow will never come. It would be easy to blame governments and business for putting money and political power at the heart of their respective policies and actions, but the whole story has to include the fact that most of us lead lives that make us not inclined to challenge social patterns and personal habits that would need to change if anything effective is to be done about pollution and global warming.

I am, I believe, the first GA President who is an immigrant – not a refugee who fled from natural disaster, war, or violent and corrupt government, but still someone who has shifted continents and cultures and has some personal experience at a low but real level of dealing with some of the issues that arise.

TV screens and newspaper headlines during the last several months have shown massive human migration, as refugees from hellish and inhuman conditions that we can barely imagine attempt to reach the relative safety and humane conditions of our respective shores. Life for millions of our brothers and sisters has become a living nightmare. We who dream of a world of peace and justice are only seeing the tip of the iceberg – the vast majority of these people are being looked after by neighbours, countries which themselves struggle to care for their own people and economies.

John Adams, one-time President of the USA and father of another President, called his fellow Unitarians "God's frozen people". But that smugness with theological correctness will not serve today's needs and probably did not serve previous generations very well either. Growth, both numerical and spiritual, comes through compassionate ministry to the real needs of our world.

I close with a quote from my address at the General Assembly on being made President: "In our liberal religious community, our Faith is our shared spiritual quest rather than our common answers; our quest, based on our *covenant* with each other to the disciplines of honesty, respect, and equality. Rationality, yes, but not exclusively because faith is about so much more than our brains. Our spirits need beauty and poetry and music as much as they need clear thinking. But whatever our personal spiritual journey, if we don't find some way to actually *work* towards the equality we hope for, our Vision, our faith is empty and our leadership in vain. As the writer of the Epistle of James told us, Faith without Works is dead."

REPORT ON THE ANZUUA CONFERENCE

The 2015 ANZUUA Conference in Melbourne was undoubtedly a most productive and united forum, with some 55 delegates and members from our churches and fellowships around Australia and New Zealand (including two from Darwin) attending.

The overall topic of Church and Social Justice met with approval not only from within ANZUUA, but was also supported enthusiastically by Rev. Peter Morales, President of the UUA (US) via video link and in person by Rev. John Clifford, President of the British General Assembly, representing British Unitarians.

The Conference was opened by Peter Abrehart, President of ANZUUA and Secretary of the Melbourne Unitarian Church, and by Rev. John Clifford, President of the UK General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Rev. Peter Ferguson of the Perth Unitarians and past President of ANZUUA, inspired us as always with his Opening Address entitled 'The Altar of Pluto'.

Four discussion groups deliberated on Inequality, the Environment, War and Peace, and Asylum Seekers in order to establish a Unitarian position on these vital issues. Facilitating these groups, each a leader in their respective fields, were Prof. Rob Watts of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Assoc. Prof. Hans Baer of Melbourne University, Rev. Harry Kerr, of the Anglican Church and Chair of Pax Christi Victoria, and Pamela Curr, CEO of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Victoria.

Four statements, endorsed at a plenary session in the afternoon, endorsed the content of the positions reached by those groups and there were many comments about taking up these issues when the conferees returned to their respective churches and fellowships. (See below.) Pauline Rooney, Vice-President of the ICUU showed us that body's new video, 'Many Flames, One Faith', which is truly impressive.

The Saturday night dinner and entertainment was first class and gave us an opportunity we rarely get to put names to faces and share our thoughts. The high point of the evening was the surprise (for everyone but the organisers) appearance of a Barbershop Quartet in tuxedos and gold ties. The Sunday Service was a most enjoyable one, with Oxfam's CEO, Dr. Helen Szoke, confirming our concerns in her very informative address on the connection between climate change and inequality. (See pp. 12/16.)

The high degree of unanimity reached at the ANZUUA Conference was a clear indication of the concern that delegates and members felt about these important issues. It was pleasing, not only to meet with our fellow Unitarians and share ideas and concerns but also to just enjoy each other's company and experiences.

It was very amply demonstrated that, while Unitarians rightly ensure their individual groups' independence and autonomy, it is still possible and, indeed, vitally important that we also emerge as a united Unitarian body when we have something important to say.

[This is mostly written by Marion Harper, Honorary Secretary of the Melbourne Unitarian Church.]

RESOLUTIONS OF THE PLENARY SESSION

INEQUALITY

Preamble: Inequality is a broad issue encompassing social, political, moral and economic discrepancies in power and respect. We recognize that inequality disproportionately affects a number of groups, both globally and locally, including the indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand. We view inequality as ultimately relevant to all of the other topics covered today: environment, war and peace, asylum seekers.

We note a key problem, communicating the issue of inequality, because most people believe that how they live is normal and they don't have a clear idea of their own wealth and in some cases privilege. Prof. Watts pointed out, in introducing the issue of inequality, that if policy is a cause of inequality, it is reasonable to believe that it can also be a solution and therefore that we can contribute to change as thought leaders.

Our aim therefore, was to draft a statement with transformative power that can hopefully be something we can all agree to and can be used by member churches for internal and external collaboration with other groups and the broader media.

“Recognizing the increasing wealth and equality division, an extreme example of which may be seen in the context of Australia and New Zealand first nations, this ANZUUA Conference understands the distinctive role played by Unitarians in influencing societal change. To this end, we commit to work with all agencies of similar purpose to promote the idea that a more equitable, just, sustainable, peaceful and compassionate world is possible.”

PEACE

This Conference notes the work of Interfaith organisations in the campaign for a world free from warfare. In the interests of all people, disputes between nations must be resolved peacefully. Instead, we witness wars that have been the greatest source of destruction of physical and social infrastructure, human suffering, massive homelessness, destruction of schools and medical facilities, as well as causing massive refugee migration, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa.

This ANZUUA Conference reaffirms its commitment to continue to work for a world of peace, stability, solidarity, cooperation and wellbeing for all.

ENVIRONMENT

This ANZUUA conference recognises that the issue of environmental degradation and the human impact on climate change has to be realistically addressed as a matter of urgency. We understand that key power relations and dominant forces shape our global economy and society. However, ecological sustainability can only be achieved by recognising that the economy is but a component of the environment, in meeting the needs of our planet and all its life forms.

REFUGEES

ANZUUA affirms the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being in our Constitution. Thus, this ANZUUA Conference recognizes the powerful campaign in support of refugees undertaken by Unitarians, both here and abroad.

We will continue to reach out and work with those who share our view that wars, the environmental crisis, political/civil unrest and inequality have created this unprecedented flow across the world. Further, we will work to educate and encourage everyone to recognize the refugee crisis and the background to that crisis. We are particularly concerned that cuts in government overseas aid and the lack of human rights legislation have exacerbated these problems.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE BUSINESS MEETING

The Business Meeting was conducted in two parts on the Saturday afternoon and the Sunday morning. At the first session, once the voting delegates from the member groups were identified, reports were received from the President, Secretary and Treasurer. The last included a five-year plan whereunder \$2000 will be spent each year to further the work of Unitarianism in the region.

A motion was passed permitting past ANZUUA presidents who have served two or more terms to use the Honorary title, ‘President Emeritus’. The First UU Fellowship of Melbourne was admitted to ANZUUA, having satisfied all the conditions for membership. It was determined that Adelaide will be the venue of the 2017 Conference.

Peter Abrehart of Melbourne UC was re-elected to a second term as President. Rev. Rob MacPherson of Adelaide UC was elected as Vice-President, replacing Jane Brooks of that church. Henri van Roon of Auckland UC was re-elected as Treasurer. (Henri will also be representing ANZUUA to the ICUU Council Meeting and Conference in the Netherlands next year.) James Hills of Brisbane UUF stepped down after two terms as Secretary and that position remains vacant.

For the first time ever, all the proceedings at the conference were recorded on video. Recordings of the two opening addresses, the link with the UUA President and the ICUU’s promotional videocast will be available for distribution in the foreseeable future.



‘Fish Heaven’ by Pierre Dumas



‘All Fish Go To Heaven’ by mortalwombat



HEAVEN

Fish (fly-replete, in depth of June,
 Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
 Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
 Each secret fishy hope or fear.
 Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond;
 But is there anything Beyond?
 This life cannot be All, they swear,
 For how unpleasant, if it were!
 One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
 Shall come of Water and of Mud;
 And, sure, the reverent eye must see
 A Purpose in Liquidity.
 We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
 The future is not Wholly Dry.
 Mud unto mud! – Death eddies near –
 Not here the appointed End, not here!
 But somewhere, beyond Space and Time.
 Is wetter water, slimier slime!
 And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
 Who swam ere rivers were begun,
 Immense, of fishy form and mind,
 Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
 And under that Almighty Fin,
 The littlest fish may enter in.
 Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
 Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
 But more than mundane weeds are there,
 And mud, celestially fair;
 Fat caterpillars drift around,
 And Paradisal grubs are found;
 Unfading moths, immortal flies,
 And the worm that never dies.
 And in that Heaven of all their wish,
 There shall be no more land, say fish.

Rupert Brooke (1913)

Rupert Brooke (1887–1915) was an English poet and writer, better known for his idealistic war sonnets. Indeed, this poem was published in his collection, *1914 and Other Poems* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915) along with his best-known work, ‘The Soldier’. Prior to the war, he had travelled the world and studied at Kings College, Cambridge.

Ironically, Brooke enlisted as a sub-lieutenant in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve in 1914 and was with the Gallipoli-bound Mediterranean Expedition Force when he developed septicemia from an infected mosquito bite. He died aboard a French hospital ship off the Aegean island of Skyros and was buried in an olive grove there.

The first two pictures are from websites where artists exhibit their skills in ‘photoshopping’ (computer-enhanced photography). The third is from a weblog called Masala Vade, which mainly deals with Indian cooking but also has humorous personal items such as an obituary for a pet goldfish. We suspect that all three artists are Americans, unless ‘mortalwombat’ is an Australian living in the US.

(Just on matters affecting World War I poetry, this year marks the centenary of the iconic rondeau, ‘In Flanders Fields’. It was written on 03 May 1915 by the Canadian physician, Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae after his friend, Alexis Helmer, was killed in the Second Battle of Ypres. McCrae was promoted to acting Colonel and named Consulting Physician to the British Forces in Europe in 1918, but he died five days later from meningitis. His poem inspired the practice of wearing artificial poppies on Armistice Day.)

HOME

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as
well

your neighbours running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin
factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases
you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of
doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem
under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an
airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going
back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the
stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles
travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough

the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now
they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hungry
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a
sweaty voice in your ear
saying –
leave,
run away from me now
i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here.

Warsan Shire (1988 –)

[The writer is a young Somali female
from Kenya who was named the first
Young Poet Laureate for London in
2013. More about her on p. 20.]



Towards a just world without poverty – Climate change, inequality, and the role of churches in driving solutions

[Text of the Address given at the Melbourne Unitarian Church on 18 October 2015 by Helen Szoke, CEO of Oxfam Australia (slightly edited to fit the pages).]

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and paying my respects to their elders, past and present. While many people know Oxfam for its work to overcome international poverty from a human rights perspective, here in Australia we also work closely in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' organisations and communities.

We work with a variety of partners to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led health and wellbeing projects, youth engagement and women's participation in the political process, and we play a central role in campaigns such as 'Close the Gap' and the recently launched 'Change the Record', focusing on the unacceptably high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people caught up in Australia's justice systems. For us, it's about walking and working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led campaigns and projects which seek a principled, human rights approach to addressing inequality and supporting the First Peoples of these lands and waters right to be heard, to have self-determination and to be free to pursue their aspirations.

Today I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you about two different but incredibly interlinked areas – inequality and climate change – and to also talk about what you can all do in response to these. Timor Leste is one of 18 of Australia's closest neighbours that are grappling with extreme poverty. Across Asia, an estimated 500 million people remain trapped in extreme poverty, most of them women and girls. And across the globe, one in nine people still go to bed hungry each night. The question is how do we change this – how do we ensure justice in a world of these continued extremes?

I came to Oxfam about two years ago with a clear understanding of the importance of human rights, and particularly of the challenges facing us domestically and internationally around gender justice. But I hadn't foreseen just how powerful Oxfam's work would be or the breadth of the challenges that are now emerging for its work. Oxfam's global work to tackle poverty and inequality is highly practical, direct and innovative. Always has been and always will be. We work with communities to support their development; we save lives during humanitarian crises; and we help rebuild livelihoods when crisis strikes. We have an incredible reach. Oxfam Australia is part of a global confederation that works across more than 90 countries to help around 20 million people each year.

Here in Australia we've been going for 61 years. 550,000 people support our work, either through volunteering their time, participating in our campaigns, giving generously or joining our conversations. We are constantly scanning the horizon through research and speaking with partners and communities to figure out how to achieve our goals more effectively. And what we have found is that we need to go beyond providing direct assistance if we are going to change the course of the globe to a more equitable and just future for everyone. So Oxfam doesn't just work with partners in developing countries to provide the opportunities people need to thrive. We advocate for change.

We don't just create change in the lives of individual people and communities, we take action to change the systems that keep people in poverty – from the very local up to the national and the global. We fight for the future we want to see: A future free from poverty where everyone can access their full human rights and fulfil their potential, and where equality, particularly between men and women, is much more of a reality than it is today.

In July, I was privileged to visit Kiribati with the Edmund Rice Centre's Phil Glendenning. We went to the main island of Tarawa, which is just north of the equator and about 2,000 km northeast of Vanuatu. Kiribati and Tuvalu are a couple of the sovereign states that are at most extreme risk in a warming world, and even likely to disappear within the next few decades if more is not done to address climate change. Some of you who are well versed in WWII history will note that Tarawa was one of the sites where the US Marines took back Japanese strongholds, with the loss of thousands of lives of locals as well as soldiers from both sides.

Let me describe Kiribati to you. The island of Tarawa is 45 km long, snaking its way through the Pacific. At its widest point – let me repeat, its widest point – it is 300m wide and that is used as the runway for the airport. And nowhere does the land sit more than 3 metres above sea level. It is an atoll that is under enormous threat and 55,000 people live on this island and the remainder of the population are dispersed across other islands. The President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, wants action now to deal with global warming, rising sea levels and the peril that his people face – the loss of culture, loss of connection to country, loss of identity.

The people of the Pacific, our closest neighbours have the most to lose most urgently as a result of climate change, and they are active. I visited Vanuatu recently to see our post Cyclone Pam work. I met with some of the representatives of 350 – a global youth coalition that is campaigning hard ahead of the Climate Change talks in Paris in December this year. These were kids from the Pacific – young people without necessarily having university degrees but whose islands, in some cases, were facing extinction due to global warming and rising sea levels, and who have a sense of urgency about their futures.

Last year, they journeyed to Australia with representatives from 11 other Pacific nations. In a powerful and symbolic call to action, these Pacific Climate Warriors peacefully blockaded the Port of Newcastle – the world's largest coal port – in their traditional canoes, making media headlines around the world. Cyclone Pam has only sharpened their resolve and these determined young activists have been building their movement and joining forces with communities around the world.

These are countries with many other challenges including poverty and hunger and violence. But the biggest long-term challenge to addressing global hunger and poverty is actually climate change. Climate change is also exacerbating inequalities, both within and between nations. I will talk more about inequality in a few minutes but first want to talk a bit more about how we are responding to climate change.

At Oxfam, we recognise that we cannot solve the climate crisis without valuing and embracing the knowledge and experiences of those communities who are closest to the land. This is the approach we take through our work helping communities adapt to climate change, in countries including Vanuatu, Timor Leste, The Philippines, and Vietnam. We do not pretend to have all the answers ourselves. Rather, we work to support communities as they harness their local knowledge, build on traditional coping strategies, and develop their resilience in the face of changes and uncertainty.

I'd like to share one example. Oxfam and other development agencies have been working in Vanuatu since 2012 to support local communities with building resilience to climate change. Living on the Pacific 'Ring of Fire' and tropical cyclone belt, the people of Vanuatu already know a thing or two about disasters. But like so many places, changing weather patterns – such as extended dry seasons and more intense rainfall when it does happen – are making it harder for families to grow and buy enough food to eat. And climate change is increasing the risk of extreme weather disasters, including more intense cyclones.

So Oxfam and our partners have been working with communities throughout Vanuatu on diverse initiatives including trialling new food crops and agricultural techniques including new irrigation and pest management measures, sharing traditional coping strategies such as harvesting and preserving foods before a cyclone, and increasing access to weather and climate information. Earlier this year, Vanuatu suffered a direct hit from one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded in the south Pacific. Oxfam responded to this emergency, providing emergency aid such as clean water and shelter, and is continuing to help communities rebuild their lives.

While no amount of effort and resources could have adequately prepared Vanuatu or indeed any nation for a test as severe as Cyclone Pam, it is clear that this investment in building community resilience was integral to Vanuatu's ability to prepare and respond to this unprecedented challenge. What this meant was that women, and their families, and their communities, were better able to act quickly and swiftly both before the cyclone and afterwards. But it doesn't end there. No less important has been the determined efforts of Vanuatu's people, with Oxfam's support, and the people of the Pacific more widely, to raise their voices on the international stage.

Before leaving the subject of climate change, I should of course mention El Niño. As many of you will be aware, existing challenges in Vanuatu and much of the Pacific, as well as in parts of Africa and Central America, are being compounded by the arrival of a particularly strong El Niño event. Australian farmers are, of course, also nervously awaiting how El Niño may affect them.

Communities that have already been hit by erratic rainfall, drought and floods now face potentially even greater challenges over the months ahead. In Papua-New Guinea, around two million people have already been affected by a prolonged dry spell. In the highlands, where almost everyone depends on subsistence agriculture, the drought has hit communities hard and El Niño is making conditions worse. It is not too late to prevent a humanitarian crisis and Oxfam is, of course, working alongside other agencies to help communities prepare.

However, what we witnessing is cause for great concern. 2014 was the hottest year on record globally. 2015 is likely to be warmer still. This 'super El Niño' is compounding the increasingly extreme and erratic weather that people have already been facing. Recent research suggests these extreme El Niño events may occur twice as often. Further, that the normal state of the tropical Pacific could become much more akin to what we experience during El Niño years. We are, quite simply, in uncharted waters. And the imperative of reaching a strong and effective global climate agreement in Paris has just grown even stronger.

What about sustainability? Women are critical. Women have been at the forefront of this strident effort. Strong women leaders are working with women and youth in their communities to bring their voices to the international stage, such as the UN climate change negotiations or the Pacific Islands Forum. In turn, they are inspiring women's movements to take action in their communities. This is essential, as women are both disproportionately affected by climate change, and are often the leaders in finding solutions.

Making up a large share of the agricultural workforce in developing countries and playing a vital role in food production and preparation, women feel the impact of climate change on food production particularly sharply. At the same time, women harbour so much of the knowledge, experience and wisdom needed to meet the challenges. It is essential that more women's voices are heard on climate change, and this is core to Oxfam's work. We know that supporting women is also critical to address a host of other challenges that women in agriculture can face. Challenges that will be exacerbated by climate change. In our work in many countries across Asia-Pacific, we see that women farmers do not have fair and equal access to land. Women cannot equally access the same support in learning about agricultural techniques as men.

Time and time again, women are excluded from decisions about new projects or initiatives that have deep and significant impacts on their day-to-day lives. In the worst cases, as we see in our work on land grabs, women are pushed off the land altogether with little if any compensation. For example, a 55 year old Cambodian woman, who I will call Thida, told Oxfam of how her house was destroyed and all her belongings moved to a resettlement site where she and her extended family live on only a 40 metre by 50 metre plot of land. Her family received just \$US300 for 13 hectares of good agricultural land, where they grew rice and other crops. Today, they have no land to grow crops.

Despite their intelligence and tenacity, many women remain more vulnerable to crises, and find it harder to farm. This adds to the day-to-day burden of women and, in turn, their children and families. What's at stake is the food security and the health of rural women and their families. For this reason, a focus on women farmers – who we know disproportionately make up the most vulnerable of all farming communities – is a key part of our focus on food and agriculture in the region.

We support women to fight for fair and equal access to resources like land and water, which we know are key to addressing women's over-representation in the poorest, most vulnerable group of farmers. We provide human rights training at the local level, so we can help give women the confidence to speak up about their vision for agriculture and land use in their community. We also know that in some countries, such as Bangladesh, rural poverty forces many young women from their homes into poorly regulated and often dangerous industries like garment manufacturing, where we also work to support them to achieve fair and safe working conditions.

2015 is a defining year for international cooperation on climate change. Governments will meet in Paris later this year to thresh out a global climate change agreement. The decisions made by our government, and others around the world, will have a profound impact on the lives of Australians and all people for decades to come. If Australia is to do its bit to tackle global climate change and avoid a future of increasing risks and hardship for communities around the world, we must both commit to far greater reductions in our own carbon pollution and provide more assistance to vulnerable communities with adapting to the impacts that can no longer be avoided.

Sadly, Australia has been failing on both fronts. Even as the UK, France, Germany and now China have committed substantial new funding to support climate action in developing countries. We can change this, but it's going to take many more of us standing up and demanding better. We need to speak up loudly about what's at stake. We need to demand our government shows leadership and becomes part of the solution in tackling climate change. We need to show that a brighter future is possible. That ordinary Australians and people around the world are already building a cleaner, healthier future. That even some of the world's poorest countries, despite having few of the resources that we are blessed with, are nonetheless taking determined action.

In January, Oxfam unveiled a shocking statistic: just 80 rich individuals hold more wealth than the poorest half of the world's population – 80 individuals. They could fit on just one bus, yet they are worth more than the poorest 3.5 billion people. We also found that globally, if economic inequality continues to rise at its current rate, we will see the top 1 per cent of people owning more wealth than the other 99 per cent combined by 2016. This is incredibly worrying. The poorest people have ever-decreasing chances as income inequality spirals out of control globally.

To give you a better picture: In South Africa, often cited as the jewel in the crown of Africa, because the country has become so much wealthier overall, economic inequality is greater today than it was at the end of apartheid. Oxfam's research has shown that, on average, a platinum miner in South Africa would need to work for 93 years just to earn the annual bonus of a CEO in that country.

And in countries like Australia, the US and the UK, inequality is also increasing sharply: Here, the richest 1% of Australians have more wealth than the poorest 60% combined. And, in the US, the wealthiest 1 per cent of people has captured 95% of the post financial crisis growth, while 90% of people became poorer. These statistics are powerful because they stir something in all of us: the idea that extreme inequality is unjust. The belief that it is wrong.

Many of the poorest countries have made great progress in the struggle against poverty. But this progress is being jeopardized by rising inequality. Inequality is dashing people's hope for a better life, and the results can be ugly. And the greater inequality becomes, the harder it may be to stop. There's a cycle to this.

If the biggest winners from economic growth get a stranglehold on democratic representation...and reduce taxes on themselves...and pass more wealth down to their children...and give those children the best education...and the best health care...and all the good jobs...and then make sure their kids enter parliament and run the country,...the poorest will be trapped in an iron cage from which there will be little chance of escape. There will be few people with access to power who will be willing to support them or even listen to them.

Other inequalities, such as those between women and men, will be compounded. People will become more vulnerable to economic shocks. Social problems will be multiplied and instability will be fuelled. What we will get is a mutually reinforcing cycle of disadvantage that will be transmitted across generations, convincing some that the system itself offers little hope. This is what is now happening. And it is hindering the fight against extreme poverty.

Inequality by its very nature creates a world in which extreme poverty will never be adequately tackled. In Asia alone, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that, since 1990, an extra 240 million people could have been lifted out of extreme poverty, had it not been for rising economic inequality. Instead, in the Bank's own words, these millions are "trapped" in extreme poverty because inequality is on the rise.

Poverty and inequality are linked. They need to be tackled together. It may seem like a problem too big to solve. But this isn't the case. So at the global level, Oxfam is fighting to change the deeply unfair systems that entrench inequality. With changes to the way we think about tax, about doing business and about aid, we can turn the tide on growing inequality.

Of course, Oxfam can't change all these things by itself. Leading economic institutions, including the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, the OECD, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank and the Bank of England are all calling for action on inequality. They say that high inequality actually harms growth, making us all poorer in the long run. The Governor of the Bank of England, has said that extreme economic behaviour is starting to break down the social contract within nations. President Barack Obama has described inequality as the defining issue of our times. And religious leaders like Pope Francis are agreeing. Interestingly these global leadership voices are also much more ambitious around tackling climate change than we see on our own doorstep!!

Of course, there is a role for Governments in all of this as well. The Australian aid program, for example, is moving towards funding more large infrastructure projects. Oxfam works to ensure, as such projects go ahead, that the companies and contractors implementing them are aware of their human rights obligations to communities. In the Mekong region, where millions of people depend on water and natural resources for their livelihood and food security, large-scale dams pose a threat: poorly planned hydropower dams, for example, can lead to displacement and major impacts on food security and livelihoods of entire communities. Oxfam works with communities and partners in the Mekong region to ensure they are involved in decisions that affect their lives.

With the support of aid funds from the Australian Government, we are promoting dialogue between communities, civil society, companies and governments to ensure water resource developments contribute to sustainable and more equitable economic growth. It's still unclear whether this program has been affected by the massive recent aid cuts, but we know a lot of programs will be. Oxfam won't be working with partners to build essential sanitation facilities in schools across Lusaka in Zambia, because of the aid cuts. Australian funding for our disaster-preparedness in Bangladesh, one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, has been wiped out. Aid to the poorest region – sub-Saharan Africa – is now next to nothing.

Across the board, we are making hard decisions to choose what we will and will not be able to proceed with, and where we can use donations from the Australian public to plug some of the whopping holes left by Federal aid spending. Of course, we are an NGO. Even if we pooled funds with the entire aid and humanitarian sector in Australia, we could not fill the gaping void left by our government.

When it comes to obligations, here we have a simple and utter refusal to take them seriously. And, perhaps, a blindness to the results and the power that good, effective aid can wield. I have talked a lot this morning about the challenge and the threat of growing inequality. A core tool in the fight against it, especially for wealthy nations like Australia, is targeted aid.

Australia should be ensuring official aid funds reach the poorest people in developing countries, by supporting their Governments to develop strong public services that everyone can access – especially in the areas of health and education. Australian aid should be helping to effectively regulate tax in developing countries, so nations like Timor Leste can derive more revenue to pay for the needs of their people. In short, Australian aid could be investing in these solutions to reduce inequality and to support governments to increasingly generate and manage their own resources responsibly, so the need for aid in the long term is reduced. But, in the short term, it is needed desperately and the government has turned its back.

We are set on a trajectory to give the lowest level of aid, as a proportion of our national economy, ever in the history of Australia. This is despite our obligation – and our international promise, to give 70 cents in every \$100 of national income in aid. Other nations, including the UK, have already met this commitment. In Australia, the second wealthiest per capita nation in the world (according to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report of 2014), this is a national shame.

I often hear arguments, such as ‘we need to look after our own first’, when I talk about cuts to aid. Before I finish, I want to set this argument straight. Right now, aid makes up just under 1% of the whole federal budget. Under 1%. Or, if we are looking at that international promise I just mentioned, we are only at 25 cents in every \$100. Nowhere close to the promised 70 cents. But this small amount changes – and saves – literally millions of lives. Aid spending is so small that we do not need to choose between looking after people who need it here in Australia and contributing a fair share to aid. Australia is wealthy enough to do both – and, of course, we *must* do both.

So far, that tiny 1% has shouldered more than a fifth (that’s \$1 in every \$5) of all savings announced by the Federal Government since their election. Talk about shirking obligations, in this case to people who have no vote, in the countries and regions that surround Australia. Oxfam is doing what we always do in the face of such injustice: we are continuing to provide the best solutions we can on the ground – in this case providing practical aid to everyone that we can reach.

And, we are fighting. We are part of a campaign of over 50 organisations that is calling for better Australian Aid. We are part of a global campaign heading into the climate change talks in Paris in December calling for more ambition to save many of the vulnerable communities and to encourage an investment in a green and renewable future. And we are part of an emerging coalition of likely and unlikely players who are cautioning that if the gap between the richest and the poorest widens, we drive more people into poverty and injustice that we see now.

I would like to highlight the critical role that churches of all faiths have increasingly been playing in this struggle. In June, Pope Francis made a remarkable call to action, making unequivocal the links between climate change, poverty and inequality, and urging all to take steps here and now to address these profound injustices. A few weeks later, Muslim leaders from around the world issued an Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, calling for success in Paris and for Muslims around the world to help ensure a safe climate for future generations.

Here in Australia, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change has brought together leaders of many faiths to speak up on behalf of vulnerable communities and encourage real action from our government. And of course, you, the Unitarian-Universalist churches and fellowships of Australia and New Zealand, are choosing to join in this fight. There is a moral and ethical imperative to help amplify our voices and to take part. To say what we think is fair and what isn’t.

We are all in this together.

[Dr. Szoke has been with Oxfam since 2013, prior to which she served as the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner and as Victoria’s Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner. She is also an Executive Committee member of the Australian Council for International Development and its Humanitarian Reference Group. She has a PhD in Public Policy - Regulation from the University of Melbourne and, this year, she received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from Deakin University for her contribution to human rights. For more information about Oxfam and its work, please see: www.oxfam.org.au.]

HAJOM KISSOR SINGH

By Mike McPhee

In a year that was short of anniversaries to write about, we managed to miss the sesquicentenary of the birth of the founder of the Khasi Hills Unitarians in northeastern India. Hajom (sometimes spelled 'Hajjom') Kissor Singh was born on 15 June 1865 in the town of Jowai in what is now the state of Meghalaya. The son of a police sergeant, he was brought up in the shamanistic religion of the Khasi people. However, some Welsh Methodist missionaries had been working in the region since about 1840 and Singh converted to their faith at the age of 15. With their help, he acquired the means of self-education – but his studies led him to have doubts about Christian orthodoxy and he concluded that he would have to leave the church to seek “the true religion of Jesus, the love of God”.

Young Singh eventually reached classic Unitarian convictions without any knowledge of our denomination. When he was 25, he learned from a liberal Hindu that an American Unitarian minister, Henry Appleton Dall, was working in Calcutta. He wrote to Dall, who sent him a book of William Ellery Channing writings which convinced Singh that the Unitarians shared his conceptions. He began holding meetings in his home for religious discussions while Dall continued to send him Unitarian publications.

Singh was aggrieved when Dall died in 1886 but his replacement at the Unitarian Mission, Helen Tomkins, was also happy to help. She sent copies of the *Unitarian Magazine* and Singh then wrote to its editor, Jabez T. Sunderland, from whom he received more literature. On 18 September 1887, a date the Khasi Unitarians still celebrate, Singh led his first church service in his home. In a short time, his church grew from four people to include two more ex-Calvinists (one of whom had been a pastor) and the three became the leaders of the new movement.

A statement of faith was adopted by the Khasi Unitarians and reported by Singh in *The Unitarian* in 1888: “We believe (1) in the unity of God; (2) in the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God; (3) in the Brotherhood of Man; (4) in Love, Union, Worship, and Faith; and (5) in Immortality.”

Sunderland was a source of major assistance to the Khasi Unitarians, raising funds to publish 500 copies of Singh's *A Book of Services and Hymns in the Khasi Language* in 1892. Donations also came from London and were used to print several tracts in Khasi in 1893. By 1889, the congregation had gained 30 members and acquired a church building, followed by an elementary school that taught in the Khasi language.

After meeting Singh in 1896, Sunderland wrote: “I have never been more impressed with any religious movement than this in the Khasi Hills. Everywhere I saw evidences, sincerity, consecration and warm attachment to the religious faith which the people had felt had done so much for them. The whole movement is unique in the fact that it has sprung from the soil.”

By the end of 1899, the Khasi Unitarians numbered 214, with an average attendance at services of 148. Singh wrote a catechism, *The Book of Brief Questions About Unitarianism*, which was only translated into English in about 2000. Adapting some of the traditional values of the Khasi culture, Singh defined Khasi Unitarianism in terms of duty to God, to fellow humans, and to oneself.

Singh had a number of interesting ‘day jobs’, including a medical dealership. As a member of the board of the local Khasi bank, he identified real estate bargains and bought houses the Unitarians could use. As a surveyor, he eventually became head clerk in the Deputy Commissioner’s office in Shillong (now the capital of Meghalaya state).

Hajom Kissor Singh died of pneumonia on 13 November 1923. Today, the Khasi Hills Unitarians (formally known as the Unitarian Union of North-East India) has more than 30 churches and some 10,000 members. This sesquicentenary event was duly celebrated in Shillong, with the presidents of the ICUU and the UUA in attendance.

[Abstracted from an article by Spencer Lavan on the Dictionary of UU Biography website (www.duub.org). The writer is a UU minister who spent most of his life in higher education, including serving as President and Dean of Meadville/Lombard Theological School in 1998–96. He has written a number of books on religious subjects, served as president of the UU Historical Society and is currently a co-editor of the DUUB.]

TROUBLE IN BURUNDI

Just when we didn't need any more bad news, the ICUU and some of its members issued the following Emergency Statement on 19 November through the Executive Director, Rev. Steve Dick:

"Within the context of extreme civil unrest in Burundi, on October 22nd the Unitarian Church of Burundi (*Assemblée des Chrétiens Unitariens du Burundi*) was attacked and ransacked, with bullets fired into walls and doors and money stolen. Members of the church were questioned by government officials who visited on a Sunday. On November 16th the minister of the church, the Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana, was arrested from the church at gunpoint, taken into police custody and interrogated severely regarding the activities of his church. He was threatened with physical harm and death. At the moment, he remains in custody with other members of the church also being questioned.

Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, Romania and beyond are united in concern for the Unitarians of Burundi. We call upon the government of Burundi to immediately cease and desist the persecution of the Unitarian Church of Burundi and its members stemming from reasons of their faith. We call for the immediate release of the minister of that congregation, the Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana, from police custody. Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Burundi, who are dedicated as we are to religious freedom and a civil society in which all persons are respected and valued.

The Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana is minister to the Unitarian Church in Bujumbura, Burundi (the Assembly of Unitarian Christians of Burundi). He is also an elected member-at-large of the Executive Committee of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists and an ICUU consultant to U*U groups in Africa."

[Concerns on the part of the ICUU for the safety of our Burundian confreres were expressed in the Winter 2015 issue. The ICUU sent the following broadcast on 21 November.]

"The Unitarian Church of Burundi is in the midst of crisis, under attack from their government for reasons of religious identity. The church has been attacked, ransacked and robbed. Church members, including the minister the Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana, have been jailed, threatened and forced to flee for safety.

Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world are taking action – from the Philippines to Canada, South Africa to the USA, Romania, the UK and beyond. Embassies, United Nations officials, congressional and other governmental offices, and human rights organizations have been contacted and asked to join in our efforts to bring this persecution to an end. We are working together on many fronts.

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists asks for your help in these efforts. Beginning with the members of our Francophone East Africa coalition, congregations which have supported the development of U*Uism in East Africa for several years, we are calling on all our member groups and contacts around the world to help raise funds in support of Unitarians in Burundi.

Your donations will enable help for displaced persons, address legal fees and building repairs, and let our siblings in Burundi know with certainty that they are not alone – that they are indeed part of a global Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist community. We welcome your participation."

The next information from the ICUU was more encouraging: "The Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana remains in police custody but he is being "reasonably" treated. He has full access to his lawyers and [senior officials of the ICUU and UUA] have been able to speak directly with Fulgence. The Unitarian Church of Burundi has submitted full financial records for the last twelve months, which are being scrutinized by government officials. ... It is hoped that the release of Fulgence can be arranged after the scrutiny has been completed.

Financial donations are even more necessary as legal and other costs will be higher than anticipated. We may need to deploy funds very quickly, so speed is of the essence in donations."

[Donations can be sent via the ICUU's website: www.icuu.net.]

!!STOP PRESS!! It has just been announced (28 November) that Rev. Fulgence Ndagijimana was released from custody but the charges have not been resolved. The ICUU will continue to focus on these concerns.

REPORTS FROM MEMBER GROUPS

Adelaide UC have extended their renovations, which included the lowering of their front wall for a more welcoming effect, to the replacement of their old notice boards – the new ones not only look better but are also easier to use. They also convey the impression of a church that is undergoing change and growth.

Their service on 13 September was followed by a discussion session titled 'Project Jam' to share ideas and express support for old and new activities offered by the church. Their 'Spring into Summer' afternoon fair on 21 November will feature children's activities, music, stalls and an afternoon tea.

Auckland UC are also proceeding with their building alterations, with part of church entrance currently blocked off. Their adult education programme on Islam will be extended by a few extra sessions to explore Islam in New Zealand, possibly with local resident Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'ite. Recent sermons by their minister, Rev. Clay Nelson, have been focused on the sacred days or festivals of other religions including Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Ostara (a pagan spring goddess, cognate to 'Easter').

They had a High Tea on 04 October as a fundraiser for the Living Wage Campaign, which was seen as an opportunity to show the wider community who they are and what they stand for. Their dyslexia project in Samoa has been proceeding for over a year and three Committee members recently visited the country (at their own expense) to review its progress and assess what to do next.

Brisbane UUF have listed the first gathering of each month as having a section specifically for children; however, so far they have only had one attendee (a fourth-generation UU) with her son. They have approached Rev. Rob MacPherson of Adelaide to see if they could pay his travel costs to come a few times a year to provide professional support.

Something that went unreported at the time was their celebration on 02 April of their twentieth year of operation. That was held on the beautiful deck of a local community centre, complete with a shared lunch and a birthday cake.

Perth Unitarians recently had a guest speaker, Dr. Richard Smith, who delivered an excellent PowerPoint lecture titled 'Human Impacts on the Earth: My 20 years of observing Earth from satellite'. The image of a melting Arctic sea ice pole hole was frightening. They are arranging a baptism for a child born in Bangkok and adopted by a Unitarian male couple who have a farm in the southwest of the state.

Spirit of Life UF recently had Steve Maxwell, Secretary of the Rationalist Society of NSW, address them on 'Living a Rational Life', in which he startled some by saying it was perfectly rational to believe in God. They are also encouraging their members to get onto Twitter as a quick way of giving feedback to government at all levels. Their website and FaceBook page have elicited several inquiries from intending visitors in many parts of Sydney.

Sydney UC heard an address on T.S. Eliot given by Prof. Barry Spurr on 06 September, which was most impressive because Eliot's father and grandfather were Unitarian ministers (yet he became a High Anglican after he settled in the UK!). A concert of mid-1900s American popular music was held on a Saturday night that featured songs by Cole Porter, the Gershwin Brothers and many less familiar songwriters.

ANZUUA NEWS

The ANZUUA Council held a Special Finance Meeting on 28 September to finalise the budget and five-year plan mentioned in the conference reports. This involved some discussion of the kinds of projects run by member groups that could receive funding from ANZUUA, based on the organisation's objectives as detailed in its Constitution.

In his Secretary's Report, James Hills mentioned that the new website he designed now needs to be integrated with the domain, which he will do before the renewal date in March. James and his wife, Renee, have been with the South American Pilgrimage that was described in the Winter 2015 issue. Hopefully, we can look forward to a report on that with some suitably stunning pictures.

WARSAN SHIRE

Warsan Shire was born in 1988 in Kenya and emigrated to the UK with her parents as a infant. She grew up in London and obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing. Her first booklet of poetry was published in 2011 and her verses have been translated into a number of other languages. After her term as Young Poet Laureate, she became Arts Queensland's Poet-in-Residence in 2014 and liaised with the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts over a six-week period.

Shire has read her poetry in Europe, North America and Africa, and also received such awards as Brunel University's inaugural African Poetry Prize in 2013 for poets who have yet to publish a full-length collection. She is now based in California and is working on a book of her poetry. She also serves as poetry editor for *SPOOK* magazine and teaches workshops around the world.

APPEAL FOR PHOTOS

Wayne Facer of Auckland, whose article on Rev. James Chapple appeared in the last issue, is collecting images from past ANZUUA Conferences. He will be grateful to receive electronic or scanned photographs, especially of keynote speakers and/or office bearers. Please give the year and identify any persons by name, member group and/or function at the conference. These should be sent to: wfacer@hotmail.com.

MORE ICUU NEWS

The new ICUU website is finally constructed and your Editor has been permitted to be one of its 'testers' before it goes on-line. It certainly has an attractive appearance and it appears to be quite functional, but it is not clear whether the site is complete yet.

The program for the Council Meeting and Conference in the Netherlands on 17–21 July 2016 has been published and it will clearly be an 'action packed' event as (in their words): "Highlights of the event will include the opportunity to help chart the future direction and programs of the ICUU during a participatory Council Meeting conducted in an exciting new way, a theme program focusing on our spiritual response to climate change and our environmental concerns, and training based workshops to share and develop leadership skills."

There will be short Worship Services every morning, led by ministers from various countries, Chalice Circle meetings (small groups) in the afternoons and 'Social Time at the Bar' in the evenings. The actual Council Meeting will be three half-day sessions on the Monday and Tuesday, including the election of the next Executive Committee. The Theme Session is on the Tuesday and the Workshops and Focus Meetings are on the Wednesday. On the Thursday are two sessions called 'U & U Uni Short Courses'. There will also be a Ministerial Conference on 22–23 July.

These events usually include pre- and post-tours for those who wish to see more of the region. While those have not yet been announced, it will be interesting to see if they are confined to the Netherlands or go as far afield as Hungary and Transylvania.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Well, here you have it – my first 20-page issue of *Quest* and I certainly didn't intend to set a precedent. I won't say it was easy or pleasant but, at least, anyone who missed the conference in Melbourne will get a pretty good idea of what went on. My particular thanks to the organisers and the ANZUUA leadership for providing all that material in such a timely fashion.

So, another year of *Quest* is complete and, yes, you're going to have to wait till next year for my history of ancient (well, 1950s to 1970s, anyway) *Quests*. While I do have some material for the Autumn 2016 issue, I can always use more and you know to send them to: michael.mcphee@optusnet.com.au.

Having said that, Season's Greetings to all of our readers, wherever they are.