



Proposal from members

58 Pastoral support for seasonal workers

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) To publicly express concern about the conditions seasonal workers are experiencing in Australia.
- (b) To advocate for the compassionate treatment of people trapped in situations of exploitation so that they can regularise their status in Australia.
- (c) To write to the Federal Minister responsible for the Seasonal Workers Program to express our support for the requests made by Pacific Island members at the Strathfield-Homebush Service of Lament on 14th April 2018.
- (d) To request the Assembly Resourcing Unit, together with appropriate Synod personnel, to:
 - (i) establish networks that acknowledge and support the pastoral work of those in the UCA ministering to these vulnerable people;
 - (ii) raise awareness across the Uniting Church of conditions for seasonal workers, particularly in vulnerable communities; and
 - (iii) work ecumenically and with civil society partners in Australia and the Pacific to improve pastoral support for seasonal workers coming to Australia.

Proposer: Fie Marino

Seconder: Uilisione Mafaufau

Rationale:

Poor conditions for seasonal workers in the Australian horticultural sector are a growing pastoral and social justice concern.

Uniting Church members, particularly from Pacific Island diaspora communities in Australia, report harsh employment conditions, and allegations of physical and sexual abuse and mistreatment. Some conditions would fall under the category of modern slavery.

Fatalities on the Federal Government's Seasonal Worker Program have been documented in a number of recent media reports.

Church members of Pacific Island background are at the frontline of the pastoral response to these vulnerable people, from supporting workers in difficulty to liaising with families grieving deceased workers. Many seasonal workers join Uniting Church congregations during their time in Australia.

The Uniting Church should acknowledge and encourage the pastoral work of its Pacific Island members by making a strong national statement of support on the plight of seasonal workers, by

hearing their testimonies at the 15th Assembly and investigating possibilities for ecumenical welfare.

Ministry agents in target areas should be trained to recognise the signs of modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking and be resourced to respond safely in supporting potential victims.

Synod Multicultural consultants would be important contact points in a coordinated interconciliar approach. Advocacy is also required to regularise migration status of Pacific Islander workforce currently trapped in the informal black economy, who are vulnerable to exploitation or may be victims of trafficking.

Background

For many years Pacific Islanders have been attracted to work in the Australian horticultural industry.

In 2009, the Australian Government Seasonal Workers Program (SWP) started as a pilot. The Program has formally been in place with nine Pacific Island Nations since 2012. Each year approximately 6500 workers arrive to work for half a year in Australia's agricultural supply chain.

Since 2012 eight young workers on the SWP have died from health-related causes. In recent years there have been many media reports of slavery-like work conditions among horticultural workers. These include conditions such as passports being seized, wages being withheld, beatings, threats and intimidation, substandard living conditions, poor nutrition, dehydration due to lack of access to drinking water, untreated workplace injuries and denial of medical treatment.

In the past and still today many seasonal workers are recruited to come to Australia on what they believe at the time are legitimate work arrangements, but later discover this is not the case.

On 14 April 2018, Pacific Islander members of the UCA organised an ecumenical Service of Lament at Strathfield-Homebush Uniting Church in Sydney to commemorate 13 seasonal workers who died while working on Australian farms under the SWP.

Around 200 people attended, including Federal Workplace Minister Craig Laundy who is the Minister responsible for the Program. Relatives and friends of the deceased laid flowers on the communion table to music performed by UCA Tonga and Fiji Parish choirs.

Assembly President Stuart McMillan and NSW/ACT Synod General Secretary Rev. Jane Fry attended as did the Sydney Presbytery, Tonga Parish, Fiji Parish and Sydney Samoan congregation. UAICC Pastor Ray Minniecon also shared his prayers and gave the Welcome to Country.

The Service of Lament led to Mr Laundy giving a personal commitment to consult directly with local Pacific communities.

The following are two personal testimonies of Pacific Island workers who were injured or assaulted while picking fruit and vegetables, shared during the Service of Lament.

"I felt like a prisoner, I couldn't talk to my family back home. I was physically assaulted by my employer. I was hit with a broomstick, had car keys thrown in my face and was verbally abused for talking to my husband in Tonga. My arms were badly bruised, I was off work for two days but wasn't allowed to go to the doctor. I was threatened with a gun that if I talked to anyone about this incident then I'll never come back to Australia. I had my mobile phone, bank card and passport taken away from me for three months then I was sent home early to Tonga." Pakileata Akauola from Tonga

"One day I wasn't selected to pick fruit so I had to stay behind at the house. The employer showed up and said he is going to give me a hiding. He said lie down on the ground. I refused, he beat me on my back, shoulders and head with a shovel. My jaw was broken, I wasn't allowed to go to hospital and didn't work for two weeks. I went to a medical clinic and paid my own expenses. All I had to eat was water and crackers soaked in milk. The contractor told me later he should have killed me instead." Nehumi Feo Kolesi from Tonga.