

The Australian Student Christian Movement (Queensland) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the People's Inquiry. ASCM is a progressive and inclusive group of Christians who, amongst other things, is committed to furthering peace and justice in our world. ASCM is part of the wider international Student Christian Movement and has been active in Australia for over a century.

At the outset, Christianity, like all religions, proclaims the importance of human life. Yet the Australian government sends us into wars we should not go into or staying longer than needed, causing needless harm to soldiers and civilians. The recent doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect {R2P} is a measure that should guide international intervention and help stop atrocities, yet countries like Australia seem selective as to who and when we protect.

There are some basic questions we need to be asking. What should Australia's foreign policy look like, especially in relation to military intervention? What should a US and Australian alliance look like?

The ASCM can, of course, highlight centuries old teachings of Jesus, as well as other faith leaders, to discern an informed response. Yet one does not have to be religious to see the value in helping the oppressed, peacemaking, and caring for human life. Further, as Christians we are called to speak up against injustice here and abroad. So, we are not calling for isolationism. We are not seeking to vilify others, and not seeking in particular to vilify the United States. We want to work with our allies.

We believe the obligation to be a peacemaker extends to government, in this case the Australian government, and we acknowledge the want to be a good ally to the United States. This means the Australian government should better fund peacemaking work, such as increasing the number of Australian diplomats, peacekeepers and peace centres. The Australian government could also provide more support to peacemaking groups here in Australia and abroad.

There needs to be a change of focus by the Australian government, away from a military focus and towards a peace focus. For instance, Australia has been involved in Afghanistan for a long time, and this has been extraordinarily expensive in both lives lost, injured physically, mentally, and in financial terms. However, it is useful to ask exactly what has been the tangible commitment of the Australian government towards peace, such as through supporting local peace groups in Afghanistan? Peace work is not always the same as military intervention.

Another measure that could reduce conflict is to reduce poverty. Christians are called to help the poor, and this is often reflected in the traditional practice of tithing. Whilst tithing is a religious tradition, it is useful to observe that Australia through its foreign aid programme clearly does not come close to tithing. The current budget for foreign aid is 1% of GNP. This is well below the recommended UN level. We would hope that the level of foreign aid is significantly increased. Pillars of peace include reducing instability and ensuring stronger civil institutions, and foreign aid can and does help build those pillars.

Any foreign policy would have to include better treatment of refugees. There are reasons why many Christian groups are involved in the work to help refugees. We believe we are called to help them, as well as all fleeing wars, poverty, and crime, and indeed economic migrants, people wanting a better life. We believe that if Australia can take in over 100,000 skilled or unskilled migrants and, outside of COVID, millions of tourists annually, Australia logically can accept more refugees. The benefits to not only the refugees, but Australia would be great.

A reduction in global poverty, lessening the need for people to travel dangerously to a better life. The ideas, talents and hard work of refugees being focused here on advancing Australia. The government should also provide more care to the refugees overseas and more support to the UN and other agencies to do that.

Any assertion that we are already providing enough support needs to be examined. Exactly where is the funding going? For instance, are existing funds going towards locking-up asylum-seekers? Further, we need to look at our overall funding for the military and the way we fund wars. How that contrasts to the funds to help refugees and to stop wars that turn people into refugees.

It is important that we have an ethical foreign policy that cares about human rights. The basic human right is the right to life, and this should mean that we need to think carefully about international military deployments. Even leaving to one side the issue of loss of life in war and conflict, much of which is in civilian lives, we need to think about the impact deployment has on military families even when there is no injury or death.

The Australian government, and most governments, argue war is always a last and necessary resort. One needs to critically examine whether our commitment to war, such as in the Middle East, really was a last and necessary resort, and whether this military commitment really has made the world safer. In other words, are the wars that Australia becomes involved in just wars? One can think of the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the invasions of Iraq.

It is interesting to ask what would have happened to Australia if we did not deploy to those regions? Would the way of life in Australia really have been diminished? What would have happened if effective peace alternatives were the focus? And by peace alternatives we do not mean just a hope for peace, but effective action.

Any Australian foreign policy such as the Australia US alliance needs to be based on human rights. The former US president Jimmy Carter provides a possible blueprint for Australia. Carter's plan was by no means perfect in practice, but the president sought to shift US policies to promote human rights. This meant reducing support for military operations, and not taking the country into war. Indeed, Carter is one of the few US presidents not to engage in war.

There are many other things Australia could do. We could provide humanitarian assistance by default in overseas conflicts, rather than combat troops. We could concentrate on rebuilding of war-affected countries, with more resources than is usually given. We would contribute far more to peacekeeping missions, in both funding and personal. We could not ignore or downplay human rights abuses by trade partners or others. We could take seriously the Responsibility to Protect mandate. And above all, we could ensure that our own human rights record is impeccable.

We make this submission mindful that we are not the first people to raise any of these issues or solutions. The challenge is to focus on ensuring that the Australian government does more effective actions for peace.

The Australian Student Christian Movement (Queensland)