

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Interim Report, May 2020

The issues described in this report reflect long-standing problems that often feel overwhelming to address in meaningful ways. How do we interrupt the global systems that allow crimes in human trafficking to persist? What could we possibly do to halt and reverse the loss of precious species with whom we were meant to share this earth? When injustice has deepened for over a century, what needs to happen to bring about reconciliation? To wrestle with these issues requires persistence and the high standard of spiritual integrity described in Isaiah 58:

Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgement, they delight to draw near to God...

The chapter starts out describing a people that seems to have a desire to know God and do what is right. The community knows all the rituals, practices and prayers. The writer even states, “they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.” (Isaiah 58:2) It seems like there is an intention to be a good, just and faithful nation. Yet Isaiah questions their efforts. Their piety and ritualized adherence to the law is worthless when not paired with an active social ethic that reaches beyond simple individualized self-indulgent acts of worship.

This passage can be uncomfortable to read because we can recognize in ourselves similar tendencies that the author describes. What do our “fasts” (doing without) mean? Why do we pray? How well do we truly examine the areas of injustice in our society? For many of us reading this report, if we are honest with ourselves, we benefit significantly from the world’s unjust systems at the expense of other humans and the environment.

What does God ask of us and especially of all who benefit from injustices? The prophet Isaiah describes to his listeners the sorts of devotion and worship God commands; devotion that works to undo oppression. “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?” (verse 6)

The International Affairs Committee’s mandate is to bring important international issues of justice to the church’s attention and to provide recommendations for how the church should respond even if it is hard or impossible in some cases to completely opt out of these systems of exploitation. The report for this year has urgency to it. Some of the recommendations have elements of a personal call to give things up in humbleness. Others have a call for advocacy, calling on governments to change policies or stand up for human rights. The report acknowledges the need to immediately start to share, as a church and people, our responsibilities.

The 2020 report of the International Affairs Committee is divided into three sections:

- Human Trafficking
- A Global Crisis: The Loss of Biological Diversity
- Effects of the Israeli Occupation on Children and Families in Palestine and Israel

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a crime of massive proportions found in all regions and most countries of the world. It is the fastest growing crime globally, involving low risk and high reward for the traffickers. Every 30 seconds another person becomes a victim of human trafficking.¹ Victims are lured into an exploitative situation for the profit of the perpetrators. This may occur within a country but can also involve trafficking across international borders.

Local communities in Canada are not immune from the problem of human trafficking. In a case that made national headlines, police in Simcoe County, Ontario, rescued 49 Mexican migrant workers from a Barrie house who were being exploited by a cleaning company. Police revealed a “very disturbing” operation that brought men from Mexico with promises of work visas, education or permanent residency. Instead, the men were housed in squalid conditions and forced to work as cleaners in Collingwood, Innisfil, Oro-Medonte and Cornwall. The traffickers charged the men fees for accommodation and food, making their situation even more financially dependent on those who were exploiting them.²

The same newspaper article reported that in July 2019, four Barrie residents were charged with human trafficking after a young woman met a man online, who then lured her to a party. Police say two men sexually assaulted her at the party and then forced her into the sex trade with the threat that if she ever left, she would be found and killed.³

The relatively easy availability of internet access in Canada contributes to the scope and variety of online abuse. According to a study by Cybertip.ca, Canada ranked in the top three of 60 countries measured in hosting human trafficking websites, hosting visual images of trafficked persons and selling these illegal images for profit.⁴ This technology also enables users to pay money to abuse victims at a distance by logging onto live webcam websites and directing sex acts by those on view.

Human trafficking, whether facilitated by technology or not, is coerced exploitation of one person in response to an illegal demand for the gratification of another or for illegal labour at vastly reduced cost to an employer. In either case, those exploited are not compensated fairly and are frequently forced to live under conditions that enable their captor's control. Often those conditions include physical or sexual violence. Opportunities for abuse are all around us – in our neighbours' homes, in local hotels and nail salons, in agriculture or industry places of employment, at highway truck stops and service centres and at large gatherings of people for entertainment or sporting events. Victims may be the teenager next door or someone brought into the local community from somewhere else in the world. The abuse is perpetrated both by those who conduct the trafficking and by those who engage in using the services of trafficked people. However, people may not always be aware that the products or services they consume may be a result of the labour of someone who has been trafficked. Human trafficking thrives on invisibility.

Human trafficking is described by the United Nations as modern-day slavery. It affects men, women and children, often those who are the most vulnerable in society.⁵ The most likely to be at risk are those who are socially and economically disadvantaged and may include Indigenous women and girls, migrant workers and new immigrants. At-risk youth, children in the child welfare system and those with disabilities can be especially vulnerable to traffickers. Migrant workers in particular may have language barriers, a deficiency of access to services and support and often lack basic information about their rights. Human trafficking involves deceiving such vulnerable persons and taking them away from their community to a place of enslavement, with little hope of escape. With promises of a better life and meaningful work, most victims go willingly at first, only to be tricked, held against their will and coerced to give services, physical or sexual, for the financial benefit of the trafficker.

The casualties of human trafficking suffer emotional and physical abuse, often living and working in deplorable conditions, with their basic human rights violated. Victims can be exploited time and again for the financial benefit of the traffickers. In a report titled, "Human Trafficking is Big Business", the International Labor Organization estimates that in 2014 this clandestine crime generated \$150 billion USD, for its perpetrators, second only to profits made in the drug trade, affecting millions of victims worldwide.⁶ Canada's Criminal Intelligence Services estimated that back in 2010 domestic sex traffickers earned an average of \$280,000 annually from every victim under their control. One convicted male offender from Ontario reportedly earned at least \$400,000 from sexual exploitation of one girl.⁷

The International Labour Organization's 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery reported that on any given day in 2016, an estimated 40 million people were victims of modern slavery. Out of these, approximately 25 million people were in forced labour.⁸ The full extent of the crime is difficult to determine because of its hidden nature and the fear or inability of victims to come forward to law enforcement agencies.

Over the last 10 years, the profile of detected trafficking victims worldwide has changed. Although most detected victims are still women, children and men now make up larger shares of the total number of victims. The share of victims who are trafficked for forced labour has also increased. About four in 10 victims detected between 2010 and 2014 were trafficked for forced labour and out of these victims, 63% were men.⁹

Human trafficking and human smuggling are often confused as the two crimes appear to be very similar in nature. But human trafficking always involves exploitation and force, with the victim having no freedom of choice. Human smuggling involves the provision of a service, typically transportation or forged documents, voluntarily paid for to allow illegal entry into a foreign country. It is possible that the crime may start out as human smuggling but escalate to become human trafficking.¹⁰

One recent striking example of the tragic effects of human trafficking was the discovery in October 2019, in Essex, England, of 39 people from Vietnam frozen to death inside a refrigerated container truck. They were all from Nghe An Province, one of Vietnam's poorest regions. Criminal gangs regularly exploit young people who are desperately seeking a better life in Europe to be able to send money back to their families. The journey is filled with danger.

Physical and sexual abuse are commonplace. Some individuals are fortunate and make it safely to England to eventually find employment but many more do not and are coerced into jobs typical of human trafficking. Many women find work in nail salons, where some have to work long hours for little pay and others are forced by their employers to engage in sex work. Young Vietnamese men are lured into work on cannabis farms, living under poor conditions. They are often deprived of their passports, making leaving the situation difficult to near impossible.¹¹ While this situation refers to people from Vietnam being trafficked in England, this type of scenario applies to people from many nations being trafficked to other countries, including Canada, as noted in the situations described in the opening paragraphs of this report.

Human trafficking in Canada

Indigenous women and girls are over-represented among people who are trafficked in Canada. One demonstration of this is in British Columbia, where a 724 km stretch of highway between Prince George and Prince Rupert known as the “Highway of Tears” is bordered by 23 First Nations communities and many small towns. This rural area is impoverished and lacks sufficient public transportation, so local citizens will often hitchhike as a form of transit. In 2013, Human Rights Watch released a report, “Those Who Take Us Away”, focusing on the need for an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women on the Highway of Tears.¹² Many of the issues noted in this 2013 report as contributing to the high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls are more fully examined in the comprehensive study initiated in 2016 by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The final report of this inquiry delivered 231 Calls for Justice directed at governments, institutions, social service providers, industries and all Canadians.

Diane Redsky is the director of MaMawi Wi Chi Itata Centre in Manitoba, which advocates for Indigenous women and children, specifically sex trafficking victims. Redsky says the history of racism against Indigenous people in Canada feeds into the cycle of violence and exploitation against them. Indigenous Canadians make up just 4% of the country’s population but more than half of all sex trafficking victims in Canada are Indigenous.¹³ Redsky and others in Manitoba are now leading transformative programs to help identify the threats and risks so prevalent in Indigenous communities, including a history of bias and racism that has prevented some members of police services from fully understanding how and why Indigenous girls and women are often the targeted for violence, including human trafficking.¹⁴

Human trafficking has escalated in the past two decades. It is not just an issue in developing countries, nor is it a threat only to Indigenous women and children. In fact, a journalist in North Carolina almost became a victim when she was offered a reporting job for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. The talent agent who contacted her said he was hiring American reporters for the Olympics. After a four month interview process the woman discovered that the “talent acquisition agency” was bogus. The FBI became involved and discovered the agency was most likely a front for a sex trafficking ring.¹⁵

According to International Justice Mission Canada, after drug dealing, human trafficking is tied with the illegal arms industry as the second largest criminal activity in the world today and it is the fastest growing. Many factors contribute to the rise in human trafficking, including long-term unemployment; gender-based inequality; the internet; a globalized, free-market economy; an increase in the demand for cheap labour, goods and services; and increased international mobility.¹⁶

How is the international community responding?

Human trafficking is one of the issues the United Nations is working to counter. The Palermo Protocols are three codes of behaviour adopted by the United Nations to supplement the 2002 Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. The first protocol is to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in human beings, especially women and children. The second protocol is against smuggling migrants by land, sea and air. The third protocol deals with the illicit manufacturing and trafficking in firearms. The protocols came into force in December 2003, in Palermo, Italy. As of June 2017, these protocols have been ratified by 187 states, Canada among them. In so doing, these nations pledged to take a series of measures against transnational organized crime. With enhanced international cooperation, the state parties can have a real impact on hindering the ability of international criminals to operate successfully.¹⁷

Effective implementation of the Palermo Protocols would help ensure that vulnerable citizens across the globe can live in safety and dignity in their homes and communities. This would align with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.¹⁸

What is Canada doing?

In 2002, Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act was amended to include human trafficking as a federal immigration offence. As of 2005, human trafficking has also been considered a crime under the Criminal Code of Canada.¹⁹ The Government of Canada's approach to addressing human trafficking is guided by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Palermo Protocols.²⁰

In September 2019, the Canadian government announced a five year national strategy plan to combat human trafficking with a budget of \$58.22 million and thereafter \$10.25 million annually in federal funding.²¹ There are five pillars of the national strategy:

- Empowerment: Supporting victims and survivors to regain control and independence and encouraging action by industry partners
- Prevention: Increasing awareness and building capacity to prevent human trafficking in Canada and abroad
- Protection: Addressing gaps in existing supports and providing culturally informed services
- Prosecution: Increasing criminal justice system capacity to identify and prosecute human trafficking cases
- Partnerships: Building and improving national and international coordination and cooperation to address human trafficking

The national strategy was designed to be adaptable, recognizing that human trafficking is a crime that is often hidden and evolving. One of the key activities included in the strategy to help inform how it is carried out is the establishment of an advisory committee "comprised of victims and survivors of human trafficking to provide a platform in which individuals with lived experiences can inform and provide their unique and invaluable recommendations to the Government of Canada on current and future federal anti-human trafficking policies and initiatives."²²

In addition to government initiatives, groups in the civil sector are also working to end human trafficking. An example is Project Maple Leaf, an initiative launched by the Canadian organization Courage for Freedom (courageforfreedom.org) on July 30, 2019. July 30 is International Day to End Trafficking in Persons. This public awareness campaign used a series of videos on media screens in 13 ONroute Service Centre locations across Ontario. These service centres are stops for gas and food along the 400 series highways in Ontario. These highway corridors are some of the busiest roadways in Canada and are being used to transport victims of human trafficking around the province and further afield, often in clear view of the driving public. It is estimated that 60% of all human trafficking in Canada is initiated along the 400 series of highways.²³ Courage for Freedom estimated that Project Maple Leaf would be viewed more than 16 million times. The advertising educates the public with tips and signs to look for in potential human trafficking and encourages the community at large to report any suspicious activity. It is expected that the project will extend to include social media and other public spaces, such as movie theatres and shopping malls, with plans for it to be a national campaign.²⁴

In a 2014 report of the National Task Force on Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada, the task force states that while many service providers report the average age of recruitment as 13–14 years old, some children are trafficked at younger ages.²⁵ Young people from middle class families as well as from poorer neighbourhoods are lured from high schools and shopping malls and enticed through social media with gifts and promises of love. The centre's confidential hotline at 1-833-900-1010 is managed 24 hours daily and serves to connect survivors and victims with local support services in communities across Canada. This initiative has funding support from Public Safety Canada and collaborates with the anti-human trafficking and global hotline experts at Polaris in the United States.

One new approach is to help fight trafficking by putting the focus on meeting the needs of the victims for such things as food, shelter, education, employment and personal safety. The government of Manitoba has committed more than \$10 million a year to fund Tracia's Trust, named in memory of 14 year old Tracia Owen, an Indigenous girl who was sexually exploited before she died by suicide in 2005. Tracia's Trust outlines a strategy developed from input from 54 organizations, stakeholders, front-line service providers, community members, Indigenous elders, law enforcement and exploited Manitobans to combat sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children.²⁶ While the content is specific to Manitoba, Tracia's Trust offers a useful model to develop a strategy to address online exploitation and trafficking, provide supports for youth who are at risk of exploitation and age out of the child welfare system when they become adults and provide substance abuse treatment, specialized placements and resources to better support exploited youth by addressing factors such as addictions and mental health.

A brief theological reflection

Freedom from slavery is a theme that runs like a thread throughout both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Exodus event in the Hebrew scriptures. This is the defining event in the life of the people of Israel when they are freed from the forced labour and dominance of their oppressors and become servants of God. “For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold.” (Leviticus 25:42)²⁷

In our own time, the church is called to action against the evils associated with forced migration and human trafficking whereby people are enslaved, human dignity is degraded and in extreme cases fatality occurs. “Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6). For a focus text in its 2014–15 study on human trafficking, the Women’s Missionary Society (WMS) chose Proverbs 31:8–9: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

The 2014 International Ecumenical Consultation on Migration and Human Trafficking: Modern Slavery? declared that trafficking in human beings is a serious justice and human rights violation. It is one of the most horrific results of the economic and social disparities that increase the vulnerability of millions of people. Migrants constitute the greater number of victims of trafficking. Such vast inequality allows many within our societies to be considered little more than disposable commodities. In opposing corrupt practices and abuses of power against human beings that are inherent in the “modern day slavery” of human trafficking we are drawn to focus on and continue to trust the passionate love of Jesus Christ for all people and the way in which Christ identifies with and accompanies the vulnerable.²⁸

What can we do?

Human trafficking is driven by demand that leads to the exploitation of others. As Christians who believe in the dignity of all human beings with the right to live in peace and freedom, we can take positive steps in prevention by advocating for peace and opposing all forms of exploitation and violence. We can take a stand and challenge those who make racist or sexist remarks, which contribute to making targeted groups more vulnerable to exploitation. We can make choices every day that encourage gender equality for individuals by giving women equal opportunities as men. We can become involved in supporting Indigenous communities in Canada in their efforts to lessen poverty that disproportionately affects them. We can support micro credit plans to allow people to have meaningful work that alleviates the poverty that is often a doorway to trafficking others or being trafficked. We can consider where goods are made and under what conditions they are fabricated and support Fair Trade production and policies. We can be vigilant about the working conditions under which people are providing services that we are consuming.

Education is key to combatting human trafficking. Rather than avoiding the difficult topics like physical abuse and sexual exploitation we can develop awareness that leads to prevention and that provides support for those affected by human trafficking. Church leaders can work to create a culture of openness and compassion, instead of judgement. By being more intentional about these efforts, churches can make headway in identifying, preventing and ending human trafficking. Congregations could invite a speaker or hold a workshop to learn about indicators of human trafficking. Daily prayers can be made both for the victims and perpetrators of human trafficking that their dignity and freedom be restored. Elected officials at all levels of government can be contacted about actions taken and being considered to address problems associated with human trafficking. We can look for healthy ways to discern and celebrate human sexuality. We can campaign for just refugee and immigration policies and safe paths of migration.

In April, 2008, the Commission on Justice and Peace (of the Canadian Council of Churches) identified human trafficking as a common concern and established the Human Trafficking in Canada Working Group to facilitate learning, theological reflection and common action.²⁹ This was done with the hope that all churches in Canada would become more aware of human trafficking in Canada and advocate together when appropriate, share and develop educational materials and provide a forum for theological reflection on the topic.

The commission produced a study guide, *Human Trafficking in Canada: A Leadership and Learning Kit for Churches* (available at councilofchurches.ca). The guide provides a series of reflections, awareness-raising exercises to help recognize indicators of abuse and exploitation, Bible studies and background materials. In an attractive and user-friendly layout, contributions from more than a dozen Christian traditions come together on one of the most pressing social justice issues in our context.

In the spring of 2017, The Anglican Church of Canada created a documentary aimed at raising awareness about the realities of sex trafficking in Canada. It is posted on the website for the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, youtu.be/-Bmfne5Dcwg and is a very useful tool for study and discussion about how to recognize, identify and respond to instances of human trafficking in our own local neighbourhoods.

Kelly Tallon Franklin is the founder of Courage for Freedom, a Canadian-based organization with the purpose to educate, train and certify front-line and community service providers on strategies and prevention tactics to serve vulnerable victims of human trafficking and sexually exploited girls. The organization seeks to build public awareness of how to recognize and respond to human trafficking through Project Maple Leaf (mentioned earlier in this report), a hotline 1-833-900-1010 and a hashtag for social media: #KnowHumanTrafficking.

Congregations are also encouraged to learn of the work of ARISE Ministry, (ariseministry.ca), an outreach mission of the Presbytery of East Toronto for those who are or have been involved in the sex trade and those at risk of sexual exploitation. This ministry is directed by the Rev. Deb Stanbury and is supported by Presbyterians Sharing.

In 2014, the WMS produced a four session study on social justice issues (wmspcc.ca/wms-study) that included a session on human trafficking. This useful resource is available online at wmspcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Social-Justice-Study-2.pdf. This study guide also offers encouragement to pray for those at risk of being trafficked, for freedom for victims, for rehabilitation of perpetrators, for those working to end trafficking and for healing for all involved. Suggestions are provided on how to organize a prayer service.

The following poem was written by Angel Power, a Peer Support Worker with ARISE Ministry. It may be a useful catalyst for discussion. Used with permission.

Lessons Learned

Our choices
Will impact our life.
Our voices
Can win the fight.

As powerful as loud and proud is silent and humble.
What do we all require in the dark?
A light or a guide so we don't stumble.

It is imperative that we always protect ourselves
Because you are a precious gift inside a soft shell.
Worrying about where you may be in the future or regretting what you did in the past is a waste of time
Because you end up missing the present moment and in that moment, you could discover what you're here to find.

Spend time with animals, be cautious of man and always respect thy land.
day dream and soul search, go to your inner church, diligently do self-work. Study, practice and question until you understand.
And if you see someone trying to find the light and are in a position where you can, always lend a helping hand.

Power, Angel. *The Darkness & the Light*, AuthorHouse, 2016.

Recommendation No. 1 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 2 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 3 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 4 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 5 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

A GLOBAL CRISIS – THE LOSS OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The various plants, animals and microorganisms that are part of the web of God's creation are the caretakers of all ecosystems. We can think of the natural world as an enormous bank account of capital assets capable of paying life sustaining dividends indefinitely. However, this is only possible if the capital is maintained.³⁰

Climate Change, ecosystem balance and biodiversity

According to the 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 25% of plant and animal species are threatened with extinction as the result of human activity.³¹

Habitat destruction has played a key role in extinctions, especially in relation to tropical forest destruction.³² Factors contributing to habitat loss include overconsumption, overpopulation, land use change, deforestation,³³ pollution (air pollution, water pollution, soil contamination) and climate change. We note with deep concern the loss of habitat due to wildfires in places like the Amazon, Australia and even here in Canada. Such loss of habitat has foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences regarding loss of biodiversity.³⁴

Climate change has been proven to negatively affect biodiversity. Increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide affects plant morphology – the physical form and external structure of plants – and is acidifying oceans³⁵ and the changes in temperature affect species ranges,³⁶ phenology³⁷ – plant and animal life cycles – and weather³⁸. Major extinctions are possible as climate change drastically alters the biology of many species. The complexity of the world climate is such that we cannot reliably predict how the climate will continue to change, just that it is changing significantly and at a faster rate than has ever been recorded.³⁹

Nature is more than just beautiful or nice to have; it is indispensable and the balance that holds the earth's ecosystems and all we call "nature" together – which, remember, includes ourselves – is fragile. One-celled plant organisms, called phytoplankton, living just below the surface of the oceans, produce 50% of the world's oxygen supply. Another 25% is produced by the tropical rainforests of the Amazon River Basin. The remaining 25% comes from plant life living around the remainder of the globe. All food products consumed by humans come from nature. Of 115 crop species, 87 depend on insect pollination.⁴⁰ Human life and all human economic activities ultimately depend on services provided, freely, by nature. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Living Planet Report (LPR) 2018 estimates that the total economic value of all the services provided freely by nature is worth about \$125 trillion USD.⁴¹ Threats to nature must, therefore, be taken very seriously, much more seriously than they currently are.

While climate change is a growing threat, the overexploitation of species, agricultural activity and land conversion are still the dominant causes of current species and biodiversity loss. Three-quarters of the earth's land surface has already been impacted by human activity. It is projected that, unless steps are taken to protect currently unimpacted land, only 10% of the earth's land surface will remain in a natural state by 2050.⁴² Wetlands around the world are estimated to have declined by more than 50% since 1900.⁴³ Forests are among the world's richest ecosystems. Tropical, temperate and boreal forests cover nearly 30% of the world's land area, yet, are home to more than 80% of all terrestrial species of animal, plants and insects.⁴⁴ The increasing expansion of commercial agriculture has resulted in the loss of 40% of all tropical and subtropical forests. The Amazon rainforest has declined in size by almost 20% over the last 50 years. Every single year, approximately six million hectares, an area of rainforest equivalent in size to the American state of West Virginia, is deforested in the Amazon.⁴⁵

Biodiversity in the world's oceans is threatened by climate change, overfishing, acidification and pollution. At the present time, 90% of seabirds have fragments of plastic in their stomachs. In 1960, it was 5%.⁴⁶ Coral reefs exist on only 0.9% of the area covered by the world's oceans and yet they provide habitat for one quarter of all marine species. Millions of people depend on coral reefs for food. Yet, the world has lost almost half of its shallow water corals in just the last 30 years and unless current levels of global warming, ocean acidification, bleaching and overfishing are addressed, it is projected that coral reefs will cease to exist by the end of this century. They will have become the first full ecosystem in the world to have been totally destroyed and eliminated by human activity.⁴⁷

Worldwide, between 1970 and 2014, there has been an overall average decline of 60% in vertebrate, that is, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish population sizes. Species' population declines are especially troubling in the tropics, with Central and South America having experienced the most dramatic decline, one of 89% compared to 1970. Freshwater animal populations have experienced an 83% decline, worldwide, over the same period.⁴⁸ The most endangered animals in the world, today, are amphibians. Amphibian populations in North, Central and South America

and in Australia have collapsed as a result of habitat loss, pollution and the introduction into their environment, by human agency, of an invasive species, the chytrid fungus, which is lethal to amphibians, everywhere, except in Africa, where amphibians and chytrid fungi evolved together and have learned to coexist.⁴⁹ As far as terrestrial vertebrates as a whole are concerned, humans, currently, make up 37% of these species' total biomass and farm animals make up 67%, meaning that all wild animals together make up only 3%.

The Possibility of Mass Extinctions

Declines in biodiversity and the possibility of significantly rising numbers of extinctions is not unknown on the earth; we know that mass extinctions are possible. During the last, approximately 450 million years of our planet's geological and biological history, scientists have identified five major mass extinction events, each of which dramatically altered the course of the evolution of life on planet earth: the Late Ordovician, the Late Devonian, the End Permian, the End Triassic and the End Cretaceous mass extinction events.⁵⁰

1. The End Ordovician mass extinction – 444 million years ago: resulted in the loss of 49% of all marine genera. (Genera is the plural of genus, a scientific term used to designate a grouping of animal species that are closely related genetically and are descended from a common ancestor.)
2. The Late Devonian mass extinction – 364 million years ago: resulted in the estimated loss of 57% of all marine genera.
3. The End Permian mass extinction – 250 million years ago: resulted in the loss of 96% of all marine species and 70% of terrestrial vertebrates. (Vertebrates are animals, marine and terrestrial that have backbones.)
4. The End Triassic mass extinction – about 200 million years ago: resulted in the loss of about 20% of all marine families and 20% of all genera. (Family is a biological term used to designate a grouping of genera that are related genetically because they are all descended from a common ancestor.)
5. The End Cretaceous mass extinction – about 65 million years ago: resulted in the loss of some 30% of all genera and 50% of all species, within the geologically short period of about 2,000 years, after a large meteor struck and exploded in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

After each of these mass extinction events, the life forms that had been dominant for millions of years ceased to be dominant and were replaced by new life forms that evolved to become dominant in their turn. The best-known example of this phenomenon was the extinction of the dinosaurs. Their replacement by mammals as the dominant life forms on earth was a result of the End Cretaceous mass extinction event.

Over the last three decades, more and more scientists have begun to express concern that the world is on the brink of or in the midst of, a sixth mass extinction event that is of anthropogenic, that is, human origin. Peter Sale, a Canadian oceanographer and ecologist, who has spent most of his life studying coral reefs, states unequivocally that humans "are responsible for most of the extinction occurring today and the rate is somewhere around 0.1 percent of extant species per year", which means that, "species are now disappearing at a rate of about a thousand times faster than the average rate of extinction over the last five hundred years."⁵¹

Some scientists, primarily biologists and ecologists, have suggested that the negative impact of human activity on the earth has permanently changed our planet to such an extent that the official current geological epoch recognized by geologists, the Holocene (meaning "entirely recent") Epoch that began 11,700 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, should be considered to have ended and needs to be replaced by an officially recognized new epoch called the Anthropocene, from the Greek words *anthropos* for "man" and *cene* for "new". In 2009, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) appointed an Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) to consider the merits of this proposed name change. In 2016, the AWG advised the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the professional organization which is responsible for defining the world's geological time scale, that they formally recognize the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene but, so far, no formal decision has been made, one way or the other.⁵²

Theological Reflection

The capacity of humankind to influence the natural world has reached an unprecedented scale that has pushed natural systems to their limits and had a devastating impact. Is this what Creator God intended for God's good creation?

The creation stories in Genesis are well-loved and frequently cited in creation care theology. Genesis tells us much about God's intentions for creation: that God is the creator of all things (Genesis 1:1); that everything created by God

is good (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25), even very good (Genesis 1:21); and that humankind was given specific responsibilities to care for and tend to creation (Genesis 1:28). It is clear that God loves and delights in creation.

God's creation does not passively receive the love and delight of God. All creation, desiring to be in relationship with God, praises God (Psalms 66:4, Romans 8:19). This is perhaps a strange notion but the Bible is full of examples of relationships transformed by God's love. The prophet Isaiah offers prophetic images where God has transformed relationships: wolves and lambs are peaceful companions (Isaiah 11:6) and weapons are remade into plowshares and pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4). Jesus' many examples of healing the sick, drawing people into community, especially those who have been excluded and marginalized and calling out those who abuse power exemplify how humankind can be in relationship with each other and creation. Romans 8:18–22 describes how all creation yearns for God's redemption. All creation is in relationship with God and God's transforming love is not just for humankind: it is for all of creation. How humankind is in relationship with the rest of creation matters. Genesis 1:28 has had a troubling legacy and been used to justify human domination over creation (and indeed other human beings). Surely the gift of the responsibility to tend to creation did not imply an abuse of power that destroys a beloved and good creation. We must strive for relationships with creation that reflect God's love of a diverse and flourishing creation.

As Christians consider the mounting ecological crises, it is easy to despair and ask ourselves, why is it up to us to deal with today? The answer is that the call to serve and love God includes all creation and us among it. The challenges are too complicated for any one person, any single group to tackle. Environmental degradation including pollution, climate change and declining biodiversity have multi-generational causes and impacts. These challenges are bound up in a snare of global politics. Canada's actions contribute to these challenges on a global scale.

While it is true that those with power and influence need to commit to working for effective solutions, the scope of the call does not negate the importance of a single creature to God. And the size of a challenge does not negate a single action taken to amend it. We are an Easter people. From decline, death and decay comes flourishing, life and redemption. This is our hope, our faith in God through Jesus: that all creation, thriving, may sing praises to Creator God.

What is the International Community Doing?

In 1992, the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit sponsored by the United Nations initiated two binding agreements, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (unfccc.int) and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (ipcc.ch). The CBD has since been ratified by 196 Parties, every country in the world, except the USA. The CBD has three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of the components that make up the world's biological diversity and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the world's genetic resources. While the CBD sets overall policies and goals, the responsibility for achieving these goals rests largely with the signatory countries themselves, all of which, including Canada, currently fall short of achieving the five medium-term strategic goals and twenty targets, called the Aichi targets, after the name of the location in Japan where they were decided on, that they have agreed to reach by 2020. Details of these targets and the targets of the signatory countries can be found at cbd.int/undb/media/factsheets/undb-factsheet-sp-en.pdf.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Living Planet Report (LPR) for 2018 celebrates the Rio Earth Summit as “a critical landmark in mankind's relationship with nature”, where “for the first time the global community came to together and collectively agreed on the importance of the natural world and our responsibility to protect it”. Highlighting some important successes such as the recovery of some whale populations and the designation of protected areas for them the LPR goes on to say that these remain “isolated wins” and that “the continued decline in species shows that we have failed the natural world”, acknowledging that “current targets and consequent actions amount, at best, to “a managed decline.”⁵³

The Convention on Biological Diversity is the only international legal instrument that explicitly seeks to protect biodiversity on planet earth. The parties to the CBD are committed to meet in 2020 to establish new goals and targets that it is hoped will make it possible to realize the CBD's long-term vision that “by 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people”.⁵⁴

In preparation for the 2020 meeting of the CBD, a working group of climate scientists and experts on the current crisis of decline in global biodiversity published, in April 2019, a major scientific paper describing and advocating for what they call a “Global Deal for Nature”. The Global Deal for Nature (GDN) is described as “a time-bound, science-driven plan to save the diversity and abundance of life on Earth”, designed to avoid catastrophic climate change, to conserve

species and to secure those essential ecosystem services that are necessary for human well-being. Advocating the pairing of GDN and Paris Climate Agreement Goals, proponents of the GDN call for the nations of the world to set a target of 30% of the earth's land mass to be protected from human development by the year 2030 and to pair this target with a renewed effort to stabilize global warming at a level below 1.5 degrees Celsius.⁵⁵ These are very ambitious goals. Failure to reach these goals will mean a diminished future for humankind. Reaching them, however, will require considerably more vision and much more strategic and concerted effort than the nations of the world have yet been able to muster.

What is Canada doing?

In 2018, Canada reviewed progress towards our national biodiversity targets. The details of this assessment are contained in Canada's sixth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity.⁵⁶ According to this assessment, Canada is on track to meet its target of conserving 10% of coastal and marine areas by 2020. Progress towards Canada's terrestrial target – which aims to conserve at least 17% of terrestrial areas and inland water by 2020 – has been slower to date. However, major efforts to accelerate this progress have been launched and an unprecedented federal investment of \$1.3 billion in nature conservation, including a \$500 million Canada Nature Fund, has been made.⁵⁷

Canada is making steady progress towards its targets related to wetland conservation, sustainable forest management, sustainable aquaculture and agriculture and controlling invasive alien species. Steady progress is also being made in expanding and improving the scientific information needed to support decision-makers, integrating information about biodiversity into school curricula, connecting Canadians with nature and incorporating biodiversity considerations into both municipal planning and Canada's national statistical system.⁵⁸

Progress has been somewhat slower with regard to the recovery of species at risk, ecosystem-based management of fisheries and reducing pollution levels in Canadian waters. These will continue to be areas of shared focus in Canada moving forward.

What can we do?

As individuals and churches, there are many actions we can take to address biodiversity loss.⁵⁹ Some of the following suggestions directly contribute to biodiversity, whereas others work indirectly to preserve biodiversity by making more environmentally sustainable choices and reducing human contributions to climate change, one of the leading culprits in biodiversity loss.⁶⁰

'Biodiversify' your landscaping and home: use environmentally friendly products and dispose of chemical and hazardous materials safely; landscape using native trees and vegetation; plant pollen and nectar plants that attract beneficial insects and bees; and plant more flowers than grass.

Avoid buying souvenirs that are made from the skin, fur, bone, shell, beak or hooves of an endangered species.

Buy wood and wood products that come from a sustainable legal source. Look for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) label.

If you choose to eat seafood, seek out sustainable options. At restaurant or at home, choose fish which are more sustainable, avoiding endangered species like Bluefin Tuna or North Sea cod and aim to purchase seafood labelled with the blue MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) logo or Ocean Wise Seafood (a program founded by the Vancouver Aquarium) symbol.

Keep your cat inside. Domestic cats kill 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds in the United States each year, 70% are killed by feral cats.⁶¹

Wrap up in winter; eliminate draughts and improve the insulation in your home.

As churches:

1. Plant a bee garden, research and build bird houses or bat boxes.
2. Start a compost bin and use it for church gardening projects.
3. Partner with other groups in your area to encourage and support local government initiatives that protect habitat and support biodiversity, helping to stem the effects of climate change.

4. Undertake an energy audit, switch to a green energy supplier, switch to low-energy bulbs, install thermostats with a timer, switch off computer equipment and turn off lights when possible.
5. Upgrade your building to be more energy-conserving. Caulk windows and doors against drafts. Improve the church insulation. Install storm windows or pane protectors over stained glass windows.
6. Become a Fairtrade church.
7. Encourage the use of locally and ethically sourced seasonal food for church meals.

Recommendation No. 6 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 7 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 8 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 9 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 10 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

IMPACT OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

Children are important: a theological reflection

The disciples of Jesus reacted sternly to the children whose parents brought them to be blessed. (Mark 10:13–16) Rebuking his disciples, Jesus embraced these children, saying the kingdom of God belongs to them.

As Jesus demonstrated to his disciples that children are important to God, so must we follow his example and work to see how we can bless and safeguard children today. God saw fit to be born as a human child in Bethlehem long ago and then too, families suffered violence, trauma and the death of their children. (Matthew 2:1–12, 16–18). Today, children continue to live under threat of violence in Palestine and Israel. In 2019 the International Affairs Committee reported on Palestinian children being tried in Israeli military courts. (A&P 2019, p. 276–79) This report considers a broader context of the devastating impact the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories has on children and their families and offers recommendations for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to consider.

Children are dying

Both Palestinian and Israeli families have lost children to violence. As the occupation stretches on with no end in sight, families on both sides have taken action to work for reconciliation, realizing that the anger and pain of losing their children to the violence was destroying them.

The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF) is a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization working with over 600 families seeking positive change in a violent context. It was created in 1995 by Mr. Yitzhak Frankenthal and a few Israeli families. All who belong to the Parents Circle – Families Forum have lost an immediate family member to the effects of the Israeli occupation. The first meeting between bereaved Palestinians from Gaza and Israeli families took place in 1998 and they have continued since.⁶² The PCFF's activities have shown that reconciliation between individuals is possible.

In December 2019, five Canadian Presbyterians – including two members of the International Affairs Committee and Glynis Williams, Associate Secretary of International Ministries – attended a presentation by two members of the Parents Circle – Families Forum in Jerusalem. Two speakers shared their tragic stories of suffering and their commitment to working for an end to the occupation. Laila is Palestinian and Rami is Israeli.

Laila lost her six month old son when the infant was exposed to teargas by Israeli soldiers. The family was held at a checkpoint for four hours while trying to seek medical care. Once admitted to the hospital, Laila was told she could not stay overnight and had to return home. That night, her son died alone. The family was not notified. Laila arrived at the hospital the following day and was told that staff could not locate her son's body. Her son is one of the many children who have lost their lives to the systemic violence of the state of Israel.

Rami was born and grew up in Jerusalem in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family whose father had been in the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the fall of 1983 Rami's daughter was born. She was killed in September of 1997 when two Palestinian suicide bombers detonated their explosives. She was 14 years old.

Both speakers recounted the sea of anger between the two communities and how it was destroying them. When her son died, Laila said she hated all Israeli people. But she had a recurrent dream, of white doves saying: “Mama don’t cry.” Initially too, Rami’s anger made him want to get even, to seek revenge. Laila spoke of her rage, which affected her family and her relationships; she said it starts with ourselves. They both asked: “whose pain is worse, who is to blame?”

Laila and Rami testify to the enduring pain of parents and families that have lost children as a result of the Israeli occupation. It is in the reconciliatory acts of ordinary people that we see hopeful lights shining. Despite the brutality of the Israeli occupation, these acts of reconciliation between families who have lost children are happening because individuals – both Israelis and Palestinians – recognize the injustice of Israeli government policies and military actions. In the words of the Parent’s Circle – Family Forum, “Bereaved PCFF members are opposed to the Occupation and believe that attaining historical reconciliation between the nations is a prerequisite for turning a future peace treaty into sustainable Peace.”⁶³ It is their vision to “influence the public and the political decision makers to choose reconciliation and the path of peace over violence and war in order to achieve a just settlement based on empathy and understanding.”⁶⁴

Right now, however, the path of peace – and especially the path of peace for children – has many obstacles. We name some of them below; incarceration, denial of rights, demolition of homes. Seeing a way forward can seem impossible but as these grieving families in the PCFF have shown each other and any who will listen, it is possible. Before that can happen, however, the injustices children and families face must be addressed.

Children are incarcerated

In 2019, the the General Assembly voted in favour of endorsing the No Way To Treat A Child Campaign. (A&P 2019, p. 30) This campaign documents how the Israeli military takes Palestinian children and teenagers from their beds during night raids. Alone and scared, they are subject to the Israeli military court system, incarcerated and interrogated, typically without their parents or guardians present, often involving threats, yelling, verbal abuse and sometimes physical violence.⁶⁵ Over half of these children report physical or psychological abuse during arrest, transfer or integration,⁶⁶ only 3% report that their parents are present during interrogation.⁶⁷ No Way to Treat a Child notes that Israel is the only country in the world that automatically prosecutes children in military courts. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the State of Israel has a responsibility to end the human rights abuses that Palestinian children are subjected to in the Israeli military court system. To do so would remove one of the barriers to well-being of Palestinian children.

Children are denied their right to education

For many Palestinian children, what should be the simple task of going to school is complicated and sometimes made impossible by such things as checkpoints. In Hebron, elementary school children and their teachers must cross through Israeli military checkpoints twice a day to get to and from school. Shaun MacDonald participated in the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel. He witnessed a situation where three teachers were arbitrarily denied entry through Checkpoint 55 in Hebron outside Cordoba School, where they teach. He explains the significance of this action: “the students in those classes would have no lessons that day, which is unfortunately a regular, yet also unpredictable, occurrence. In this area, the universal human right of access to education is completely subject to the whims of the Israeli military authority and the so-called ‘security needs’ of the illegal settler population in the centre of Hebron.”

Children are impacted by demolition of homes and schools

Since 2004, 987 residential units have been demolished by the Israeli military in East Jerusalem leaving 1,704 children without a home.⁶⁸ Six year old Zainab⁶⁹ attends Bedu al-Ka’abna Basic Co-ed School. When Zainab’s home, which was a few hundred metres from the school, was demolished, her principal shared with Ecumenical Accompanier Amy Zavitz that he watched Zainab dig through the rubble to find her school bag. He stood with her in the playground as she stared at her demolished home – her entire existence under threat. The principal asked, “What does it mean to be human?” Zainab’s school has 21 demolition orders on its buildings and trees.

Children in Gaza lack access to basic amenities

In Gaza children are denied access to necessities – water, electricity, safety. In 2012, the United Nations predicted that Gaza would become unlivable in 2020.⁷⁰ Many would argue that dire prediction was already reached in 2017. The sewage, water and electricity infrastructure have been greatly damaged such that hardly any sewage treatment

installations remain to purify water before it is dumped in the sea or used for irrigation. Water is essential for life yet Sara Roy, an expert on Gaza from Harvard University's Center for Middle East Studies, writes, "innocent human beings, most of them young, are slowly being poisoned in Gaza by the water they drink and likely by the soil in which they plant."⁷¹

Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper, cited a study from the RAND Centre for Middle East Policy, indicating that 97% of water in the Gaza strip is undrinkable by any international standard and that polluted water is the leading cause of child mortality, accounting for over 12% of child deaths.⁷² The need to conserve water, even polluted water, means that schools have one toilet for every 75 pupils and one sink for hand washing for every 80 students.⁷³

The hospitals in Gaza are ill equipped to treat many of their patients. In desperation, parents seek permits to take their children to hospitals outside of Gaza where treatment is available but are often refused permission to accompany their children. While Israel claims that more permits are being granted to parents to accompany their children, Holmes & Balousha state that according to the Israeli charity Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI; a partner of the Church of Scotland): "7,000 permits were issued for minors from Gaza last year. Less than 2,000 permits for parents were granted, suggesting most children travelled without mothers or fathers."⁷⁴

The Rev. John McCulloch, minister of St. Andrew's Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem and his wife, Annette a physician, travel to Gaza regularly as part of the Church of Scotland's mission work. The following is a report from a 2019 trip:

There are times in life when you come face to face with human suffering and your heart weeps, as you know that this is just one of many similar stories and anything you do to try and help just feels like a miniscule drop in a vast ocean of injustice.

Our transit through the Gaza border crossing some weeks back was one such moment. We had just got through the Hamas checkpoint on our way back into Israel after three days in Gaza. We were waiting on a bus to drive us through the security buffer zone to Israeli Security. It was on the bus that we met 9 month old Sajida and her grandmother.

Sajida is suffering from leukaemia and needed specialist treatment in a Jerusalem hospital. We spoke with the grandmother in our broken Arabic, as she told us a little more about the situation. A few moments later Sajida's mother came onto the bus, to try and feed Sajida with a syringe and to say goodbye, as she and her husband had not been granted permission from the Israeli authorities to travel with her to the hospital.

Annette spoke with the mother and told her that we would help Sajida and her grandmother through the checkpoint with her bags and drive her straight to the hospital in Jerusalem. The grandmother told us that she would have had to get two buses, which would have taken over 2 hours and used up the scant money they had. The Rev. Angleena Keizer (a Methodist Ecumenical Associate with St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias), sat next to the grandmother and Sajida on the way to Jerusalem, as tears ran down her face at the injustice of a situation where parents are separated from their children.

We do not know whether Sajida survived and was reunited with her parents. Sajida is just one of many children, victims of conflict in an unjust world.⁷⁵

Children and Trauma

The psychological stress of conflict on children cannot be understated. The issues covered in this report lead to levels of trauma for children and families that are devastating to children's well-being; not only now but with life-long impacts. A study into the impact on Palestinian civilians under the Israeli occupation finds that 87% of respondents in Bethlehem report psychological stress at home, reporting "uncontrollable fear, hopelessness, fatigue, depression, sleeplessness, shaking episodes and uncontrolled crying episodes or enuresis [involuntary urination at night] in children."⁷⁶ In the words of another study, "Palestinian children's mental health problems were compounded by their extreme adverse socio-economic circumstances, which is a common finding in research with children who are victims of political conflict. Most traumatic events occur in refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where generations of children have been born for 55 years with little hope of escape."⁷⁷ This second study also noted that while children directly exposed to war trauma reported significantly higher post-traumatic stress and fears, children exposed to other types of traumatic events – for example, through violent images on the news – also reported adverse effects, such as anticipatory anxiety and cognitive expressions of distress. While the Israeli occupation impacts

Palestinian and Israeli children in different ways, the violence of the occupation has negative mental health impacts on both groups of children.

We know from studies into childhood trauma that it leaves deep scars on both body and mind even into adulthood, causing increased physical and mental health problems and increasing a person's chances of early death or suicide.⁷⁸ Addressing the trauma children face would not simply improve the lives of children today – a worthy enough goal on its own – it would also help ensure futures where well-being is possible. Groups like Defense for Children International and Wi'am: The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Centre work to help children through documenting abuses and calling powers to account or through focusing on 'trauma-coping' strategies for children in the West Bank. The work of these and other organizations supports families and peace making but in any case, it is clear that healing cannot fully begin until the occupation ends.

What can we do?

1. Share: As Presbyterian Canadians the call is to share the stories boldly, share them within our congregations and with our elected officials.
2. Act: Support the various Israeli and Palestinian organizations that seek to alleviate the suffering and trauma of innocent children.
3. Go and See: If it all seems too unbelievable, go and see for yourself. Join one of the witness tours that will introduce you to life on the ground for the Palestinian people. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has partners in Palestine and Israel with which we work. International Ministries of the Life and Mission Agency maintains a list of active partnerships.

Recommendation No. 11 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 12 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 13 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

Recommendation No. 14 (will be presented in final report to the General Assembly)

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