

**INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Gospel, Society and Culture Committee of the Presbyterian
Church NSW

Date Received: 26 February 2025



**Submission to the Modern Slavery
Committee of the Inquiry into modern
slavery risks faced by temporary
migrant workers in rural and regional
New South Wales**

The Presbyterian Church of Australia
in the State of New South Wales

February 2025

Who we are

The Presbyterian Church of Australia in New South Wales and the ACT ('the Church') consists of 183 congregations with over 13,500 adults regularly attending and supporting their local church and outreach into their local communities. The Church operates four independent schools and three low-fee Christian schools educating over 5,500 students, five of these schools in regional communities across New South Wales. It provides a range of disability services, including Allowah Disability Support Services, supports chaplains in hospitals and prisons, operates a Theological College and six Early Childhood Services for Pre-schools/Kindergartens/Childcare, and coordinates the teaching of scripture in public schools which involves over 400 voluntary Presbyterian scripture teachers.

This submission has been prepared by the Gospel, Society and Culture Committee of the PCNSW General Assembly by Christine Metusela and Karine Woldhuis. For further information contact the convener of the committee, Rev. Dr. John McClean.

Rev. Dr. John McClean
Convener of Gospel, Society and Culture Committee
Presbyterian Church of New South Wales and the ACT

Our Position

1. The Christian faith affirms the need for justice, compassion and human dignity, where each person has the opportunity to flourish and be free from the oppression of slavery.
2. Slavery is harmful to individuals and to communities, denies justice to the vulnerable and has no place in a flourishing society.
3. As many as 41,000 Australians are living in modern slavery, however incidents of modern slavery are significantly under-reported.
4. In rural areas of NSW, migrant workers in agriculture and meat processing are particularly at risk of modern slavery.
5. Church attenders interact with temporary migrant workers both in their local congregations and in the wider community and offer various supports including emotional, physical and spiritual.
6. State and local government support, including funding, would help churches to enhance their current community connections with temporary migrant workers, through activities such as ESL classes.

The Presbyterian Church of New South Wales endorses the submission by:

- Be Slavery Free

This submission presents our Christian perspective on modern slavery, followed by findings from the literature on modern slavery in Australia. Finally, we present findings from a survey we conducted among Presbyterian churches in NSW which give unique insights into church attenders' perspectives of modern slavery and experiences of connecting with temporary migrants in NSW.

Christian perspective on modern slavery

Our submission is framed by Christian convictions which guide our response to modern slavery. The bible has much to say about human dignity, justice and compassion needed for the healthy functioning of society where each person has the opportunity to flourish and be free from the oppression of slavery. We offer but a brief selection of these teachings.

Slavery and slavery-like practices have existed throughout the history of humankind. Modern slavery subjects a person to being treated as if they were the property of another to be used, bought or sold. The experience of slavery is an abuse of power against another human being, denying their personal agency, freedom, safety and dignity. The existence of modern slavery is costly to the social, moral and economic health of our society.

Christian teaching upholds the inherent dignity and equality of every individual. In the opening chapters of the bible, we read that people are made in God's image. Genesis 1:27 states "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This is the foundation of our conviction that every person has inherent dignity, value and worth. This dignity and respect extend to all men, women and children regardless of ethnicity, status, gender or age (Galatians 3:28). No one should be dehumanised, exploited or marginalised. In situations of modern slavery, the abuser disregards their victim's identity as someone who bears the image of God. Failing to uphold and defend the dignity of another person is an affront to God (Proverbs 14:31). Given this teaching, determined efforts to stop modern slavery are to be pursued.

The bible teaches the centrality of 'work' in humanity's existence. Work was intended for our good and the flourishing of society. Work was designed to be purposeful and fruitful. In Genesis 1-2, God himself is described as engaging in the work of creation (Genesis 2:2-3). Humans, being made in the image of God, were also to engage in meaningful work (Genesis 2:15). Humanity was to multiply in number, to exercise authority over the natural world as representatives of God. There

is generous provision by God for people that would enable them to carry out their mandate of care for the world (Genesis 1:29-31), under the ultimate authority of God (Genesis 2:15-17).

Tragically we soon see people turning away from God and breaking the harmonious relationship between them (Genesis 3). This break had devastating consequences in humanity's relationship with God, with one another and with the world. The bible describes the struggle that would ensue between people, the transformation of work into hard labour and painful toil, expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the tragedy of death (Genesis 3:17-21). Victims of slavery are often subjected to inhumane conditions of forced labour, denied their wages and are prevented from leaving. We see the extreme distortion of the original purpose of work in the reality of modern slavery.

The bible speaks of rhythms of work and rest that God has instituted for humanity. God himself rested on the seventh day from the work of creation and Israel's law made provisions for rest (Exodus 20:9-11, Deuteronomy 5:15). In situations of modern slavery, victims are denied their rightful enjoyment of work, regular rest and fair payment.

The bible documents the existence of slavery and slavery-like practices. Joseph was a victim of trafficking (Genesis 37:12-36), the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 1). The focal point of Israelite history was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. God heard the misery of the people and rescued them (Exodus 3:7-10; 14:4). God's kindness in bringing freedom to the Israelites was foundational to how they were to then treat the marginalised amongst them. The Israelites were commanded to not oppress the widow, orphan, migrant or poor but rather to show mercy, just as God has shown them mercy and delivered them from slavery (Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Zechariah 7:9-10). They were commanded pursue justice and mercy for all people, with particular attention to caring for people vulnerable to exploitation (Micah 6:8, Isaiah 1:17).

Across the biblical account there is a continual movement from captivity to freedom. The freedom gained by the Israelites is understood as a shadow of the redemption found in Christ through his death on the cross (Romans 3:21-26). The good news that Jesus brought centred on proclaiming "freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). While this points to a spiritual reality of being set free from sin, it also flows into the physical reality of working for the freedom of all who are held captive today including in situations of modern slavery.

Jesus' life was marked with deep compassion for people who were marginalised and vulnerable in society. He sought the good of those outcast and restored them to their communities (Mark 5:1-18, Luke 8:43-48, Luke 17:11-14). Jesus taught his followers in the same way to seek the good of

people suffering and those marginalised (Matthew 25:34-40). Today this implies a concerted and strategic effort to end the suffering of those in modern slavery in our communities.

In summing up the teaching of the law and prophets Jesus gives two profound commands, to love God wholeheartedly and to love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40). Love for God is to be worked out through a deep love and care for others. This includes a commitment to respecting everyone as bearers of God's image and upholding their dignity, equality and value as individuals. It is not an option to overlook the existence of modern slavery amongst us, but rather we have a duty to actively seek the good of all people, especially those who experience exploitation.

The Christian perspective is that the abuse and subjugation experienced by people in situations of modern slavery and slavery-like practices is abhorrent. Slavery is harmful to individuals and to communities, denies justice to the vulnerable and has no place in a flourishing society.

Background to modern slavery in Australia

The following section presents findings from the literature on modern slavery in Australia with a focus on temporary migrant workers in NSW.

The term 'modern slavery' refers to a person being exploited and controlled. Exploitation can take various forms, including labour exploitation, domestic servitude, exploitation in criminal activity and sexual exploitation. Modern slavery offending is often motivated by profit. Victims are forced, coerced or deceived into exploitation and then can become trapped in a situation they cannot escape from. Victims are vulnerable and many come from difficult family backgrounds, poverty or areas where there is little work. They may be offered a job and a chance to build a new life for themselves. Many cases of modern slavery go under-reported due to the physical control over the victim or a mistrust of authority (The Clewer Initiative 2025).

Modern slavery is a world-wide problem. It is estimated that globally 49.6 million people are living in modern slavery (Anti-slavery Australia 2025). In Australia, approximately 41,000 people are living in modern slavery, a prevalence of 1.6 people per 1000. However, this figure is likely to be much higher as modern slavery is under-reported - research suggests that only 1 in 5 victims of slavery being identified. This means that 80% of victims of modern slavery in Australia do not get the support they need and remain in slavery (Anti-slavery Australia 2025).

Between July 2021 and June 2022, authorities received 294 modern slavery reports. In this period, 42 reports were of forced labour (Global Slavery Index 2025). According to report findings, forced

labour exploitation occurs predominantly in industries such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, meat processing, cleaning, hospitality and food services (Cockayne et al 2024). These industries often rely on migrant workers who have entered Australia on temporary visas, for example, Pacific migrants who arrive on labour mobility schemes that are designed to fill worker shortages.

The 2021 census estimated that approximately 30% of temporary migrants in Australia resided in NSW. This included 6,135 Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) workers that mainly worked in agriculture and meat processing (Cockayne et al 2024). Temporary migration can benefit temporary workers, their communities of origin, businesses in rural and regional NSW, as well as the communities in which the workers live in temporarily. However, there is an increasing urgency to address the situation of temporary migrant workers in NSW who are at risk of modern slavery. Many of the industries that experience the exploitation of migrant workers are prevalent in rural areas such as agriculture (farm labour, fruit picking) and meat processing.

Holders of working holiday, seasonal worker, international student, skilled temporary work and bridging visas are subject to exploitation in Australia (Cockayne et al 2024). Visa conditions that tie workers to their employers create a power imbalance that can be manipulated by employers (Global Slavery Index 2025). Vulnerable workers face risks of debt bondage, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, deceptive recruiting, forced labour and, in extreme cases, servitude, sexual servitude or human trafficking. The risks of labour exploitation and wage theft that temporary migrant workers in Australia face often result from deception or fees that are incurred throughout the migration process. There is often also limited oversight, monitoring and enforcement of workers' rights and conditions in industries where there are high numbers of temporary migrant workers. The exploitation of vulnerable workers includes underpayment of wages, inconsistent pay rates, non-payment of entitlements such as leave or superannuation and sub-standard accommodation (Ellis and Mulholland, 2022).

Cultural and language barriers, limited knowledge of workplace laws and standards and reliance on employers who sponsor migrants' temporary visas can expose temporary migrants to greater risks of modern slavery and exploitation. For example, seasonal workers on government-run labour mobility schemes are dependent on fair treatment by employers who sponsor their visas to Australia, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Migrant communities are at heightened risk of exploitation given the range of economic and linguistic vulnerabilities they might face. The most

vulnerable are those who do not have literacy in English and refugees who have been traumatised (Anti-slavery Australia 2025).

Seasonal workers are vulnerable to debt bondage stemming from a lack of regulation around how much employers can deduct from workers' wages for transport and accommodation. Workers may not feel comfortable coming forward to report abuse due to uncertainty around whether their treatment qualifies as exploitation and a fear of missing out on future work opportunities in Australia. Migrants on visas with restrictions on the amount of work that can be performed, such as student and humanitarian visas and irregular migrants are also particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Global Slavery Index 2025). Disengaged and undocumented workers face heightened risks of modern slavery, particularly forced labour. There are thought to be several thousand disengaged PALM workers currently in Australia, with many likely to be in regional NSW. In becoming undocumented or disengaged, workers frequently lose their access to accommodation, health insurance and income (Cockayne et al 2024).

The following section addresses the terms of reference for the inquiry, especially h) *support and resources needed by local communities, NSW Government frontline agencies and non-government service providers to support at-risk and vulnerable temporary migrant workers, including education, training and cultural capability needs.*

Presbyterian Church survey findings

Churches are present in and engaged in their communities and are 'eyes and ears on the ground'. We surveyed Presbyterian church congregations in NSW to gain insight into church attenders' interactions and experiences connecting with temporary migrants. In this section we present our unique findings for this submission.

In December 2024 we conducted a survey with open-ended questions which was distributed among NSW Presbyterian churches. Respondents to the survey came from 17 Presbyterian churches across NSW. According to 78% of respondents, temporary migrant workers had attended services and activities at their church within the last four years. Respondents were also aware of temporary migrant workers in their wider community.

The results of the survey highlight the role of the local church in supporting temporary migrant workers, in particular in providing hospitality, social support, pastoral care and spiritual support as well as practical care. Members of the congregation interacted with migrant workers at church, at

school and at work. Examples were given of the practical, emotional and spiritual support offered through the church:

Generally we provide emotional and practical support to help people settle into a new life, encourage them when they are lonely, connect them with other Christians in their workplace to support them.

...invited her for lunch after the service and she visited our family a number of times while she was here.

Many church meals with PALM workers at Costa Tomato glasshouses in Guyra including many Ni-Vanuatu.

Some migrant workers had undertaken ESL classes run by the church. Others had been given food hampers and clothing, especially in winter months. It was also noted that some churches provided support to migrant workers who faced legal issues:

The Vanuatu workers arrived on mass in a cold spell a couple of years ago. They were shocked and freezing. Our church responded with a large donation of jumpers. Whenever new folk from the tropics arrive in winter we now ask them if they have enough warm clothes.

One lady was in need of emotional support because of legal issues.

Some survey respondents said that they had discussed within their church about ways they could potentially help temporary migrant workers. This included discussions about setting up an English as a Second Language class at the church:

We have discussed ESL and have an experienced adult literacy teacher in our congregation. Also discussed offering tutorial to kids.

We often have workers from Vanuatu who are believers and attend church with us. They can be quite lonely and feel isolated. ESL could also potentially be a good way for us to bless them.

One respondent stated that their church had plans to hold a regular bible study followed by a meal with PALM workers:

Next year a Bible Study/Fellowship meal every 2 weeks to include PALM workers.

Respondents highlighted that they felt under-resourced to help temporary migrant workers even though they were keen to be able to help.

We would love to care for this part of our community better, but find it difficult and feel under resourced.

Challenges respondents observed temporary migrant workers and their families experiencing

Survey respondents highlighted challenges and needs that they observed temporary migrants experienced. Key challenges included migrant workers being separated from their families, that were back in their home country. This included lack of support networks and separation from their home church. This separation from family and friends was exacerbated for temporary migrant workers when there were also language barriers:

Limited English makes them isolated and vulnerable making them feel isolated and vulnerable.

Respondents observed financial and cost of living issues, lack of transportation, lack of warm clothing and affordable housing. Migrant workers were observed to have irregular working hours and “receiving medical attention when needed” was challenging.

It was also observed that some migrant workers were faced with different work expectations than what they had expected when they first came to Australia.

Dealing with the differences in work conditions compared to what they were told before they left the country, eg. pay, car, housing, etc. Idealistic distortion about the work on the farms, it is much harder than they expected.

Signs or indicators of exploitation observed among temporary migrant workers

Survey respondents were asked to comment on any signs or indicators of exploitation that they may have observed among temporary migrant workers that they had interacted with. Main observations from respondents included overcrowded living arrangements, unpaid wages and unfair rental arrangements.

Many of them are staying in overcrowded houses, sometimes in caravan parks, which isn't an ideal situation, especially for families.

Respondents observed that employment conditions were not met including unpaid wages. Temporary migrants worked long work hours in inadequate conditions and there were cases of transport provision that had been promised that were not met.

One time I was told by a temporary migrant worker that, on his first day of work, he had to walk several kilometers to his workplace and be late. This wouldn't have happened if the

company provided a phone (to arrange transport) and/or a car, which the company had promised beforehand.

He also mentioned how their pays were deducted more than they expected by an "agent" who was kind of a middle-man between the temporary migrant workers and the company.

Needing food or financial help from the church because they have not been paid or been underpaid.

...almost like slave labour being paid cash in hand and threatened with deportation if they complained.

It was also observed that some workers were given “bad advice about visas”. Respondents reported that some workers became disengaged because of these challenges.

Sometime later, many of them had moved away from the town in search for a better working condition.

Church partnerships with local organisations or local government to support temporary migrant workers

Some survey respondents were already partnering with local organisations and local government to support temporary migrant workers.

I am on a Costa and Community liaison committee that meets bi-monthly.

Local migrant organisations all have our details about the ESL classes, which is our main point of contact with the migrant workers.

Local Council Multicultural Association.

Recommendations

Survey respondents made suggestions for improving the situation of temporary migrant workers in NSW. These included:

- Budget accommodation – to get Council to approve more residences on large blocks.
- Advice about which visas migrants are entitled to and the work conditions attached.
- Funding for churches to provide ESL education for migrants.
- Community activities which involve social interaction, support wellbeing and address social isolation.

- Provision of spiritual support from home countries i.e a chaplain (a Bislama speaking Ni-Vanuatu that I could talk to who could talk to our PALM workers).

Presbyterian church congregations are active in serving the community and providing support to the vulnerable. Churches are present in communities where temporary migrants reside and so are in a good position to support them through a variety of strategies including awareness, spotting red flags and reporting signs of modern slavery.

Churches could strengthen support of temporary migrant workers in their local communities through:

- Provision of training in human trafficking awareness - how to identify potential victims, where likely to come into contact with them, what steps to take if modern slavery is suspected, reporting of modern slavery.
- Funding for cross cultural capability training. This could be done by church denomination, or in collaboration with other churches/ community groups.
- Funding to run ESL classes and help setting up an ESL program.
- Cross cultural workers/chaplains.
- Increased volunteerism to support existing community organisations.

These activities could all be enhanced by partnership with and funding from state and local government.

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