

Finding our Voice with Indigenous Australia

Victorian Council of Churches

Oration 2016

Acknowledgement of Country *I'd wish to acknowledge that we are in Wurundjeri Country. We give thanks for its beautiful borders of mountains and streams and the way in which it continues to provide for her people. We acknowledge the many Elders and Custodians who continue to care for this land and who are the knowledge keepers and leaders of their communities. We also give thanks for the many Aboriginal people and families who call this place home.*

This evening I'd like to touch on three areas. This includes the importance of Country for Indigenous Australians and the ongoing impact of colonisation on our people. Finally, I'll ask the question, what is the role of the Church in all of this – what would the Gospel expect of it?

I have had the privilege to live and work with the culturally rich and diverse nations of south eastern Australia. These have included -

Barkandji Country – the place of the hot arid plains, where one can see the footprints of Biamee, the Creator Spirit of the Barkandji people.

The Yuin nation on the south coast of NSW, whose stories surround the sea and who jointly manage the Booderee National Park. The Yuin people pay attention to the skies and the presence of the sea eagle – known to represent the 'father and protector' of them all.

The Wiradjuri people refer to themselves as the River People and are deeply attached to the rivers that flow through their Country. The Wiradjuri have a wonderful saying that one needs to be 'calm like the water, and strong like the current'; and,

The Ngungawal people - the people of the highlands whose stories and Country include the foothills of the snowy mountains and whose Country was an important meeting place for the many surrounding nations.

There are several hundred Aboriginal nations on the Australian continent, all of which are culturally distinct – each with their own history, language, arts, culture and ways of doing things. However while there are significant differences, there are also great similarities. Across Australia, Indigenous communities are actively involved in the care of Country and a heritage that dates back many thousands of years. And while for some of that time, Aboriginal knowledge had gone underground, (because of discrimination) we have seen this knowledge begin to flourish and increasingly passed on to our young people. For instance, did you know that there are more speakers of Wiradjuri language, than there were even 50 years ago? Cultural revival is happening everywhere with our people. Indeed, the transmission of culture and heritage to future generations is seen as a priority for Aboriginal nations across Australia. More recent research has revealed what we already knew; that

when Aboriginal children have strong cultural identities, they grow into strong and resilient adults. For our people, a strong identity begins with Country.

Indigenous Australians are taught very early that what happens to Country; happens to people. In many locations where activities such as mining occurs, Aboriginal communities fear the damage to sacred places and the physical and spiritual consequences for their people. For instance, the Yorta Yorta people who live along the Murray River are very active in the activities surrounding water management in the Murray Darling Basin. They believe that the poor health of the river, is responsible for the poor health of their people (Weir, 2011). Further, their stories include the Murray cod, which they believe has a map of their country on its belly. If something happens to the cod and it disappears, they believe that the water will no longer be 'living water' and will bring about dire consequences for the people and their families.

In many Aboriginal communities the importance of being 'grounded in Country' begins very young. Some continue to rub earth over their children at birth to connect them with 'the mother'. Adults continue to feel the earth of their Country, claiming it is what gives them strength and the aged often return to Country 'to die' so their spirit can find its way home. Indeed, the spiritual attachment to Country can be one of the most stabilising influences throughout one's life. These beliefs and practices manifest in cultural traditions old and new. Aboriginal performer Geoffrey Yunnipingu sings of being conceived and carried by 'Wititj' (the Rainbow Serpent and Creator Spirit) while Indigenous singer and songwriter, Christine Anu, sings of her 'Island Home'. Actor Ernie Dingo speaks of Country as being central to 'who he is', while Vicki Couzins, an Aboriginal artist and storyteller, reminds us that when Country is strong, so are its people.

Country is central to our identity as Aboriginal people – and this is reflected in the arts, including an ancient tradition of storytelling. Stories are used for the transmission of heritage and include knowledge of living and adapting to a changing climate over thousands of years. The immense value of such knowledge has only recently been embraced by conservation authorities. Where the management of national parks are shared, Indigenous Australians show immense and detailed knowledge about caring for Country, including the unique way in which they physically and spiritually relate to it. This is knowledge rarely found, except amongst Indigenous peoples the world over.

The principles governing the care of Country extended beyond conservation or those of sustainability. Indigenous Australians see themselves as co-creators of life, which demands that our people are both physically and spiritually active in the care of creation. Indeed, when a child was born they were very intimately related to Country and the life upon it. Thus the meaning of Kin extends beyond mere humans to all of life. People were seen to be an equal part of creation, rather than having 'dominion over it'. Our Stories also provide us with the Law on how we must care for it and for each other. Like the Gospels, many of them are sacred stories surrounding the time of creation which highlight the importance of all the Creator has made. Within Aboriginal Dreaming stories there is an emphasis on the equality of all; co-operation and the common good. It is these teachings that undergird the spirituality of our people where a lack of competition, inter-dependency and a sense of family when together, contrasts the individualism so prominent in Western Society. When

we think of the concept of sharing, it has a much deeper meaning with Indigenous Australians and includes sharing at the physical, emotional and spiritual levels.

Other stories speak of the history of our people including pre and post invasion, and provide glimpses of life between nations prior to contact. Others recall experiences of violence, life on the mission and the removal of our children. The impact of colonialism has been profound on Indigenous Australians, the stories of which have been passed down from one generation to the next. What most Australians do not realise however, is that colonisation is alive and well and affects every aspect of life for our people.

Colonial ideology has always adhered to constructed 'truths' about Indigenous Australians underpinned by notions of deficiency and have very little to do with how Indigenous peoples see themselves. However, 'the ability to shape discourse, legitimatise and reproduce it, builds power'. Thus, in Australia, policies of 'protection' saw the establishment of reserves and/or missions, where the 'correction' of 'cultural deficits' was a priority (Linklater, 2014). Attwood (2011) highlights the 'historical wounds' of colonisation. Wounds that every Aboriginal person and family continues to experience. These wounds derive from the very personal experience of Inter-generational trauma. Every Aboriginal family in every community has such a story. Inter-generational trauma is experienced by many First Nations people across the world. If left unresolved, it is the kind of trauma that worsens with executive generations as people and families attempt to function. Blackstock (2011) has undertaken research on Inter-generational trauma and found that it impacts families up to seven generations. Indeed, Nova Peris commented recently that '*Aboriginal people have no inherited wealth; they have inherited pain*'

This is 'the lived' experience of Indigenous Australians and is not something that is relegated to the past. Author Linda Briskman (2013) points to the 'civilising mission' of the colonisers which continues to inform policy in the 21st Century, especially in relation to Indigenous young people. Policy has, and continues to 'assimilate and acculturate'. It is an approach inherited from the early period of contact, where Indigenous Australians were only seen as subhuman and often associated with the fauna and flora of our continent. Such an attitude is found within other nations, where frontier violence was ignored by Western legal systems. In Canada, 'the politics of 'starvation' 'cleared the plains' of First Nations people. In Australia, dispossession occurred through the legal doctrine of Terra Nullius, providing opportunity for the violence that was to follow. Historian Henry Reynolds has written widely on this subject, revealing that some of the remotest areas of this continent, continued to kill Aboriginal people well into the 20th Century.

In south eastern Australia, Aboriginal people were either killed outright, water holes were poisoned, or in some places, the river boats were used to transport our people to distant locations, far from their country. What we fail to realise however, is that dispossession and alienation from land and its resources are ongoing experiences for Indigenous Australians. We saw this in the introduction of Native Title twenty five years ago -a system so complex, it confounded Aboriginal communities, with the many legal and political barriers to regaining access to their traditional lands. More recently, The Northern Territory Intervention and the withdrawal of basic services in over 100 Western Australian Indigenous communities are a good example of this. Such policies are made on the grounds of race and are indicative of

discursive practices which continue to give agency for the removal of Indigenous Australians off Country.

So committed are our governments to 'assimilate and acculturate', that they will go to almost any cost to fulfil such objectives. For instance, the Intervention is one which has cost all Australians dearly. At the end of 2014, it had cost more than 1 billion dollars in its implementation; however there were costs far more important than mere dollar figures. Consider the impact on the young people growing up within those communities, or the self-esteem of the men and boys. People report feeling embarrassed and ashamed, while others make the connection between such strategies and the paternalistic policies of 100 years ago while living on the mission. At a national level, consider the impact on the issue of Reconciliation and the deepening ravine in the relationship between Aboriginal people and other Australians.

More recently, we have seen a further encroachment on the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live and manage their own lives, in the quarantining of incomes across the homeland areas of the NT and SA. The effects of such have been profound, with many people being forced 'off Country'; of becoming dispossessed, since the cards provided, allow for only certain stores and purchases, most of which are in distant towns and cities.

In 2015, Tony Abbot reported to parliament that the NT Intervention had not achieved most of the things it had set out to do. It had not improved numeracy or literacy, it had not improved poverty, nor had it provided employment. In fact, other things had worsened such as the incarceration of Aboriginal youth and adults. Reported rates of attempted suicide and self-harm have increased five-fold since the NTER and the rate of actual suicide amongst Aboriginal youth increased 160 percent. The Elders Report into the Prevention of Self Harm and Suicide (2014) identified the relationship between such behaviour and colonisation, particularly the effects of living as a marginalised people. This is supported by earlier work which identified discrimination as a major cause of depression, anxiety and feelings of suicide in Aboriginal youth. Indeed, the connection between colonisation and Aboriginal health is deadly.

In Australia, self-determination has been at the heart of Indigenous rights and is expressed through Mick Dodson's (1994) account of its origins. He asserts -

"Time and again indigenous peoples expressed the view that the right to self-determination is the pillar on which all other rights rest. It is of such a profound nature that the integrity of all other rights depends on its observance. We hold that it is a right that has operated since time immemorial amongst our people, but it is the right that is at the centre of the abuses we have suffered in the face of invasion and colonisation. The dominant theme of our lives since colonisation has been that we have been deprived of the very basic right to determine our future and how we would live"

Gaining the right to self-determination is an ongoing struggle. Neo-liberal governments have often rejected self-determination, using negative discourses to justify their actions.

For instance Altman and Hinkson (2007) refers to the discursive ploys used in the justification for the Northern Territory Intervention, claiming neo- colonialism can be seen in the reproduction of Aboriginality as problematic and Indigenous people as 'high risk' requiring intensive intervention and governance. These are the great myths of our nation.

The impact of discrimination on the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal people, families and communities is profound. We just need to consider the racial onslaught of Adam Goodes (Australian of the Year) to understand this. It is what prompted Stan Grant (Wiradjuri man and leading Journalist) to write his book called 'Talking to My Country' (2016). He writes....

We occupy the same land, but we tell ourselves very different stories. They tell themselves this is a great country of good people. However, the Australian dream abandoned us to rot on government missions, tore apart families, and condemned us to poverty. There was no place for us in this modern country and everything we have won has come from dissent, it has been torn from the reluctant grasp of a nation that for much of its history hoped that we would disappear. We know this history, my people. This is a living thing. We touch it and we wear it. It is written in the scars on the bodies of men like my father. It is carried deep within us, mental wounds that cannot heal. It is so close we can touch it...

In an interview, Grant made the comment – 'I know how Adam Goodes feels... every Indigenous person has felt that way'.

I recall being at school in the 1960's never daring to admit to my Aboriginality, it was the worst thing you could possibly be. Thus all of the migrant kids were my friends. However it was always very real to me, that 'being Aboriginal' was far worse than being a migrant – regardless of which country you came from. I recall as a parent, my son coming home from school and pleading with me not to mention I was Koori. I recall as an Indigenous person entering ministry, that I 'should be working with my own people' and that any Aboriginal person entering into ministry had to 'jump the hoops' of a white system. Each and every generation of Aboriginal people have experienced racism throughout their lives, if not often. Research has shown that it not only affects our people physically and emotionally, but more importantly, spiritually. It makes them question their identity; who they are and their place in the world.

We just need to consider the shocking report on the ABC 4 Corners program recently that revealed the abuse and torture of Aboriginal young people in detention, to understand that racism in this country is alive and well. And while it appears a Royal Commission into such behaviour may occur, we recall an earlier Royal Commission into 99 Deaths in Custody, where no one was charged and very few of the recommendations were implemented. I recall working within a prison where one of those deaths occurred, despite the victim pleading for a doctor. Since that time, Aboriginal organisations such as ATSIC, Aboriginal Legal Aid including a range of programs that sort justice and equality for Indigenous Australians, have either been abolished or their funding withdrawn. And yet the needs are great.

Of all people living in the NT, 17% are Indigenous, yet our people comprise 97% of the prison population. Aboriginal young people often steal because of poverty. Too many either haven't enough to eat or are homeless. Indigenous Australians in south eastern Australia, share all of the identified issues within 'Closing the Gap'. While there have been improvements in some areas, Aboriginal people continue to have lower levels of education, higher unemployment and a shorter life expectancy compared to other Australians.

In relation to income, the median household income of Aboriginal people is almost 40% less than that of other Australians. In NSW the number of Aboriginal children in foster care has increased in the past decade from 5,059 to triple that number. Despite forming only 3% of the total population, Aboriginal children comprise 35% of all children removed from their parents. Our people call this the new 'Stolen Generations'. In addition, fewer Aboriginal children are re-united with their families or communities, while many become vulnerable to homelessness and/or incarceration upon leaving care. Such a trend is reflected within our prison system.

The incarceration of Aboriginal people affects all Indigenous Australians. Almost every Aboriginal person of every generation has had family members who have been in prison. (Three of my loved ones have been there, one from each generation.) While it has been primarily young boys, today the number of Aboriginal women in prison has risen alarmingly. Research has shown the major issues for women is poverty, domestic violence and a lack of culturally appropriate safe places for women to be. Thus they become homeless and/or turn to crime to support the kids. Thus the trauma multiplies and impacts each and every generation. It impacts on the ability of people to function and is often at the heart of mental illness. There is a great need for healing within our nation; our communities and families, yet healing cannot occur within the largely discriminatory environment we continue to experience.

However, I wish to turn to the strengths of our people – because there are many!

Some of our strengths include -

- 1) We are relationship orientated people. In a culture where co-operation, inter-dependency and sharing are natural, our people are very gifted at 'relationships' and 'community building'.
- 2) Many of our people make gifted leaders. Because our culture has a focus on relationships and the common good, Aboriginal leaders operate through consensus and are able to take the people with them, ie they 'share the vision' with those around them.
- 3) Aboriginal spirituality can make a vital contribution to the care of the environment, including living and adapting to a changing climate. The longitudinal experience of

living on this continent, means that our knowledge of species and changing weather patterns are part of the oral history of Indigenous Australia.

- 4) Within our traditions creation is seen as 'Spirit filled', thus having an inherent right to exist. We see ourselves as being part of creation and not the centre of it. Thus we place great value on the work of nature.
- 5) We were dispossessed of Country and yet continue to be resilient people. This is particularly important for the farming community, forced to come to terms with change and a departure from long standing traditions. In addition, values such as the 'common good', working co-operatively and the sharing of resources provide important lessons for survival.

Finally, what should the church do? What would the Gospel expect of it?

Psalm 1 'And they shall be like trees planted near streams of water...that bear their fruit in due season'. For me, this means coming alongside Aboriginal people wherever they happen to be and affirming who they are as Indigenous people; as Gods people.

God is found within relationships; God is relationships. The Church needs to equip its people on how to develop relationships with Indigenous Australians. This is not an easy thing and can be time consuming. And remember....your story is different to our story. The equipping of clergy has become a priority in the Canberra Goulburn diocese.

The church needs to develop a passion and a voice for those on the edge -- just as Jesus did throughout his ministry. Indeed, Scripture teaches you *'Cannot have faith; without action'*.

The Church needs to collaborate and empower our people recognising the strengths that we have. Jesus empowered a whole range of marginalised people, simply by seeking them out and showing the rest of the world that they were of value. The establishment of partnerships with Aboriginal communities is seen as critical. In the Canberra Goulburn diocese, we have begun this through Anglicare and the fostering of Aboriginal children. Anglicare Riverina is partnering a local Indigenous organisation, equipping and empowering them to gain accreditation as a foster care organisation. The diocese sees this as a two-way learning opportunity and while accreditation will be gained shortly, this relationship will endure into the future.

The Church needs to *affirm* Indigenous heritage and spirituality within the life of the community. This is more than simply to 'tolerate' – it is to embrace!

Work at the local level and celebrate the local culture. Too often people travel to distant and/or remote locations to experience 'traditional' culture. This is inappropriate and is to be discouraged if you haven't explored the local culture first. Remember that the cultures of south eastern Australia are rich and diverse.

Understand that Reconciliation is not just about the building of relationships and must also be about providing *opportunities* for Indigenous Australians. It may mean developing different pathways into ministry, doing ministry differently as well as the sharing of resources to support it. It most certainly means valuing the unique gifts that our people bring to such a vocation.

Finally, Reconciliation must have a shared voice to be heard! Given the immediacy of technology and the way in which information is transmitted, there is no excuse for ignorance; no excuse for inaction. When we think about the discriminatory policies and the abuses against our people it is time to act now. To be complacent with such a system, is to be complicit...the Church must find its voice alongside Indigenous Australians.

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