

Introduction

This is the first in a series of mini-books that will reflect upon Deacons and ministry practice in the Uniting Church in Australia. The aim of the series is to bring greater awareness of the Ministry of Deacon in diverse ministry contexts. In this first resource, **Deacons and First Peoples**, Deacons and Deacon candidates reflect on ministry.

The resource may be used by Period of Discernment candidates (PoD), PoD mentors, Selection Panels, candidates for ordained ministry (both Ministry of Deacon and Minister of the Word), Formation Panels, Placements Committees and Joint Nominating Committees (JNCs) and congregations.

Contributors and chapters

Introduction

Article 1: Deaconess Win Hilliard

Article 2: Rev Bill Harris (Deacon)

Article 3: Rev Bev Fabb (Deacon)

Article 4: Rev (Aunty) Denise Champion (Deacon)

Article 5: Rev Michelle Cook (Deacon)

Article 6: Rev Dean Whittaker (Deacon)

Article 7: Rev Sophie Lizares (Deacon)

Article 8: Rev Jesse Size (Deacon) and Chelsea Size (Deacon candidate)

Article 9: Deacon candidate Olly Ponsonby

Appendix: Recommended reading

Introduction: Recognising, respecting and reconciling

(a brief overview of the Uniting Church in Australia's relationship with Aboriginal and Islander people in Australia since 1985 when the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) was formed).

The Uniting Church hopes for a nation that acknowledges the rights of Indigenous Australians as the first people of this land, respects the land on which we live, and is committed to empowering Indigenous people to take control of their own lives and destinies. A key component of our justice work is to bring First and Second Peoples in Australia together and to support the Aboriginal community generally. The Uniting Church in Australia recognises the pain and damage caused to our First Peoples through settlement and beyond.

In 1985, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), was formed, following key meetings at Crystal Creek near Townsville in 1982 and at Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island in 1983. The Congress requested and was granted by the UCA Assembly authority to make decisions in all matters relating to ministry with Aboriginal and Islander peoples.

In 1988, the UAICC invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

In 1988 the UAICC Assembly resolved (88.22.22.d): to support efforts to work beyond the concept of the compact proposed by the Australian Government towards a form of treaty – that is an enforceable agreement obtained through formal and full negotiation between Aboriginal political structures and those of the wider Australian community, an agreement which Aboriginal people can use to protect their interests;

In 1988 the UCA issued a Statement to the Nation for Australia's Bicentennial.

It stated (in part):

'In the last two centuries the movements of history have brought together here in one nation, people of diverse cultures. As a church which is itself composed of people of many cultures and races, both Aboriginal and migrant, we rejoice in the vision of a multicultural society where these peoples may live together in unity and diversity, maintaining different cultural traditions, yet forging a common destiny based on commitment to the ideals of equality of opportunity, tolerance, justice and compassion.

At the same time, those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are the descendants of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who were Aboriginal people. In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal experience of violence and injustice.

The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularised in the media, must cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation.

The integrity of our nation will be measured by action; by legislative action which honours the Aboriginal plea for justice, and by popular action by which the Australian people express their

willingness to support Aboriginal Australians in the quest for justice and their struggle to reconstruct their society.

As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in cooperation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together.

In 1994, after much struggle and debate, the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia entered into a covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. On Sunday 10 July, 1994, at the 7th Assembly of the UCA, the Covenant Statement was read by then President of the Uniting Church Assembly, Dr Jill Tabart, to the Chairperson, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Pastor Bill Hollingsworth. Together, they signed the Covenant agreement and Pastor Bill Hollingsworth presented Dr Tabart with the Covenanting painting. In his response to Dr Tabart's Covenanting Statement, Bill said: "It is good and right that the church should repent of any of its actions in support of a policy that violently discriminated against and oppressed God's stewards of this land. Because it is pleasing to God to love one another, and it is our commitment to do so, we invite you on behalf of Congress members to develop a new relationship by entering into the struggle of those issues that presently are the cause of continuing injustice resulting in broken relationships."

In 1997 the UCA made a formal apology to the Stolen Generations and participates each year in National Sorry Day.

In 2000 the UCA resolved (00.11.02.b): to endorse the idea of a legislated process of negotiation between the leaders of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Australia towards a formal agreement dealing with the 'unfinished business' of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's process of reconciliation;

In 2009, The Revised Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution stated:

"As the Church believes God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands, and as part of that to recognise that when the churches that formed the Uniting Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.

Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning 'sovereign' in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.

Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their well being, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.

Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were

complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.

The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

From the beginning of colonisation the First Peoples challenged their dispossession and the denial of their proper place in this land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Uniting Church in Australia.

And thus the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

Covenantal relationship is the relationship which exists between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Assembly, which began in the invitation of 1988 and response of 1994, in which both groups commit themselves to developing more just, inclusive and equal relationships in the Church that recognise the place of First Peoples, the difficult history of this nation since invasion, and the particular responsibility of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for ministry with and among Aboriginal and Islander peoples. First Peoples are the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of Australia who are the indigenous peoples of this land. These peoples are a diverse group with many languages and communal identities.

Second Peoples are all those peoples who have come after the First Peoples and who are beneficiaries in some way of the invasion and dispossession of the lands of the First Peoples. Among Second Peoples within the Church are many whose racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, experiences and expression of Christian faith are not those originating in Western forms of thought and theological expression.

In 2015 the UCA resolved (15.22.02.b) to continue to support Recognition as long as the form of recognition offered can be seen as a step towards and not a blockage to the larger issues of sovereignty and treaty and (15.22.02.c) to commit to work with Congress to educate membership of the Church about the need for a treaty.

In 2017 a UAICC National Executive Meeting endorsed the Statement from the Heart which includes this paragraph: "We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history."

In 2018, the 15th UCA Assembly set aside the Sunday prior to Australia Day as a Day of Mourning. "Be mindful there are two stories. First People's stories can be told through the Day of Mourning. Until there is a shared history, we're not going to have a history that is going to journey together. We are all Australian but aboriginal people are the first peoples". (Pastor Mark Kickett). Rev Denise Champion said, "It will give the First Peoples a chance to heal. There is so much grief around what we have lost. Grief keeps adding - compound grief over what we have lost - we need this so the wider community can see the Church take the lead so that healing can come".

In August 2018, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) resolved to establish a Sovereignty Affirmation Task Group (SATG) to consider the practical outcomes for the Church arising from the 2018 15th Assembly's affirmation of First Peoples as sovereign peoples.

Resolution 65 of the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church states:

In the light of:

(a) the Preamble to the Constitution of Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) which defines sovereignty to be the way in which First Peoples understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians, and

(b) the Statement from the Heart's acknowledgement that sovereignty is a spiritual notion, reflecting the ancestral tie between the land and First Peoples, affirms that the First Peoples of Australia, the Aboriginal and Islander Peoples, are sovereign peoples in this land.

For their work, they have developed the understanding that 'Covenanting is the relationship that shapes how we have conversations about sovereignty and its implications.'

SATG role and responsibilities:

1. Look at the arrangements in place between the Assembly and National UAICC, Synods and Regional Councils with respect to:

i. Concepts of "restitution" and "reparation", particularly in respect to property usage, sales and beneficial ownership.

ii. Current structures under which UAICC operates, both nationally and at Synod levels.

iii. Resources being applied at all levels of the Church structure to develop leadership within the UAICC.

And as a result make recommendations for any changes to regulations, policies or guidelines which may be required.

2. Investigate how this affirmation might shape training for ministry and lay education within the UCA, identifying what is already in place.

3. Consider what might be required for Congregations, Presbyteries, Agencies and Schools to respond to this affirmation in their contexts.

4. Consider what foci, in response to the affirmation, the UCA should have in respect to advocacy with Federal and State Governments.

A final report with any further recommendations will be developed in conjunction with the UAICC's National Conference in January 2021 and provided to the March 2021 ASC meeting in preparation for the 16th Assembly 2021

The task group will:

1. Be grounded in the gospel and build upon the tradition of the Uniting Church in Australia.

2. Live out our covenant as First and Second Peoples.

3. Live out our commitment to being a multicultural church, oriented towards justice.

4. Embody an inclusive church where those of differing ability, age, gender, race and sexuality are welcomed.

5. Ensure that the activities of the Task Group are consistent with the Basis of Union of the UCA, the Constitution and Regulations, and align with the current strategic priorities of the Assembly.

6. Consider how the work of the Task Group relates to other councils, agencies and groups within the UCA, and work collaboratively wherever possible.

7. Consider how the work of the Task Group relates to other bodies ecumenically and with other civil society organisation and work collaboratively wherever possible.

8. Where appropriate, conduct its work on the basis of rigorous, contemporary research and analysis.

The Membership of the Group appointed by the ASC, on the recommendation of the Assembly Consultant Covenanting (Stuart McMillan) after consultation with UAICC is:
Rev Dr (Deacon) Michelle Cook (Task Group Convenor), Mrs Cheryl Lawson, Ps Mark Kickett, Rev Fie Marino , Rev Seungjae Yeon, Rev Garry Dronfield.



(Back row: Ji Zhang, Juliette Tautala'aso, Mark Kickett, Seungjae Yeon. Front Row: Stuart McMillan, Garry Dronfield, Michelle Cook)

In 2019, the UCA President, Dr Deidre Palmer, said, “We renew our commitment to walk together with our Congress brothers and sisters towards a nation where First Peoples are celebrated at the centre of what it means to be Australian. We continue to grieve and lament the dispossession, and ongoing injustice for First Peoples. We continue to seek to journey together in the Spirit of Christ and acknowledge that we are still on a journey of learning what it means to be bound to one another in a covenant. Walking together means at times putting the interests of the other ahead of our own. It is a particular challenge for us as Second Peoples to preference the needs of First Peoples, thereby enabling justice, equity and healing to be realised in the relationship. In living out our covenantal relationship, we will advocate for First Australians to be given a Voice. We seek to be a healing community which fosters truth telling, and we support the treaty negotiations of First Nations Peoples with various governments.”

We encourage the whole Uniting Church to listen deeply for what it means to walk together, First and Second Peoples, to lament the past and to seek to be a healing community, characterised by the love of Christ.

What is UAICC



Aboriginal and Islander Christians from all over Australia came together to form a National Congress, the result of a vision developed through a series of gatherings in the early 1980's. UAICC consists of Aboriginal and Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia and members in fellowship who may also be members of any other denomination; UAICC is made up of Aboriginal and Islander people seeking to fulfill their calling as Christians among their own people, especially in the area of holistic community development; UAICC determines our own goals and objectives and decide policies and priorities; UAICC runs our own programs and institutions; UAICC aims, in collaboration with other people, to bring to an end the injustices which hold Aboriginal and Islander people at the fringes of Australian society and to help Aboriginal and Islander people achieve spiritual, economic, social and cultural independence. UAICC seeks to unite in one fellowship all Aboriginal and Islander Christians who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord, accept the authority of the Scriptures and desire to follow and serve Christ as his disciples.

(Source: <https://uaicc.org.au>)

(from the Statement to the Nation 1988):

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At the same time, those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are the descendants of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who were Aboriginal people. In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal experience of violence and injustice.

The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularised in the media, must cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation.

The integrity of our nation will be measured by action; by legislative action which honours the Aboriginal plea for justice, and by popular action by which the Australian people express their willingness to support Aboriginal Australians in the quest for justice and their struggle to reconstruct their society.

As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in co-operation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together.

In co-operation with all fellow Australians of goodwill, we are committed to work for justice and peace, calling for honesty and integrity, encouraging tolerance and compassion, challenging acquisitiveness and greed, opposing discrimination and prejudice, condemning violence and oppression and creating a loving and caring community.

We are conscious of conflicts and tensions within the nation and the world. We deplore the divisions of humanity along racial, cultural, political, economic, sexual and religious lines. In obedience to God, we struggle against all systems and attitudes which set person against person, group against group, or nation against nation.

We will seek to identify and challenge all social and political structures and all human attitudes which perpetuate and compound poverty.

ARTICLE 1: Deaconess Winifred (Win) Hilliard (1922-2012)

A great Australian has passed-on and her memory deserves to be treasured by all who love charity and justice. Rosemary O'Grady, Lawyer (Melbourne)

Win trained in Melbourne as a Deaconess between 1948 and 1950 and was commissioned in 1951. She had short placements at Carlton, Victoria (1950-51) and Albury, NSW (1952-54). Win was hoping to follow in her aunt's footsteps by working as a missionary in Korea, but she was asked to go to Ernabella. This became her life's main ministry, and she lived for 32 years in Ernabella, from 1954 to 1986. Until then, she had had no real previous experience of Aboriginal people and had only lived in large cities and towns. Yet she had an amazing ministry amongst the indigenous community at Ernabella, especially with the women.

It was the policy of the Presbyterian Church that the missionaries learnt Pitjantjatjara, so for several months after arriving, Win had instruction in the local language. She retained fluency in the language for the rest of her life.

Win took over the role of the arts centre co-ordinator at Ernabella (established 1948), and the centre remains the longest continuously running aboriginal arts and craft organisation in Australia.

For the first 28 years of the arts centre, artists worked almost exclusively spinning and weaving wool, and making hand pulled floor rugs incorporating the distinctive Ernabella designs (*anapala walka*). Win introduced different media, always with an emphasis on the quality of production. In particular, she introduced batik into Ernabella in the late 1960's, enabling the women to translate traditional art and designs onto fabric and thus setting up a profitable business. It quickly became a signature art form for Ernabella. The batik technique has more recently been adapted for ceramic pieces made in the ceramics studio at Ernabella (opened 2003).

Win's background made her the ideal person to teach the women various arts and crafts, with her training including two years learning various art and craft techniques at the Presbyterian Ladies College which she did as part of her deaconess and missionary training. She was able to demonstrate various arts and crafts to the women so they could experience them and choose what they wanted to do. Specialists and practitioners were brought to Ernabella to teach the finer aspects of the arts and crafts and to resource the women and help them develop their techniques.

Of her time in Ernabella, Win reflected: "I love that I've had the great opportunity of living and working with the Aboriginal people in Australia. It's a privilege that has been shared with others who have lived with the Aboriginal people – in every case you'd find they're grateful to have been given that opportunity to live with these people and learn to understand their point of view."

Win was able to travel to Ernabella to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Ernabella Arts in 2008.

During her 32 years in Ernabella, Win was able to gather a remarkable collection documenting many aspects of Ernabella's history including the church and school. The most significant components of the collection are the many examples of art and craft including batiks and other decorated fabrics, children's drawings, paintings, and various other wooden implements and carvings.



As part of Win's contribution to the religious life at Ernabella, she illustrated lessons and stories with her distinctive drawings. Similarly, her drawings were used on Christmas cards which were sold as a way to raise funds for Ernabella.

Win was also a very competent photographer, and with her keen sense of history, was able to photograph many aspects of the life at Ernabella, the physical surrounds and flora, and the women and their art. In 1963 she was awarded a certificate of excellence in the Kodak International Colour Picture competition!

Win's contribution to the life at Ernabella was recognized in being incorporated into the local social organization and given the name, *Awulari*. She was awarded an MBE in 1977 (Member of the Order of the British Empire) and a medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 1989.

Win wrote several publications including the book *The People in Between*, published in 1968. Her nephew Peter, a mechanic, also spent most of his life at Ernabella and is now retired in Alice Springs.

Win Hilliard was one of our diaconal pioneers whose life and ministry and we celebrate her remarkable life!

ARTICLE 2: Rev Bill Harris (Deacon) (Ordained February 1988)

The date of my ordination belies the fact that my ministry with First Peoples actually began while I was a lay worker in the Methodist church in South Australia and then in the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church. Having had just one year at Chapman Alexander Bible Institute (CABI) / Wesley College in 1963 where I was studying to matriculate and complete some theological studies I was given the opportunity to spend a year working in the church and was appointed as a Circuit Assistant in the Methodist Circuit in Port Augusta. Amongst the duties assigned to me was being 'the chaplain' to aboriginal people residing in the sandhills near the Umeewarra Mission.



Umeewarra Mission was a Children's Home about 4km out of Port Augusta. Established in 1937 it was run by the Christian Brethren as a Home and school for Aboriginal children. In the 1950s-60s between 50 and 70 children lived at the Home but there was no accommodation provided for families. In 1964 when the area came under government control and was renamed Davenport Reserve. At that time, three types of housing were established. Demountable houses

with basic facilities (electricity and water) for those employed on the reserve, shacks erected by individuals with campfire cooking, and access to shared toilets and washing facilities.

During my year in Port Augusta I worked on two main areas. Working with the Reserve Superintendent to get accommodation for families squatting in the surrounding sandhills, and working to integrate people into the town itself.

One significant project I worked on was participation of people living in and around the reserve in the annual Pointsettia Festival. In conjunction with a local artist we managed to have an Aboriginal girl in the queen competition and a float in the Pointsettia Festival parade.



We also organised an exhibition of art from indigenous artists in the Methodist Church Hall. Mostly from artists living in the reserve.

It was also the year that Don Dunstan sought to give drinking rights to aboriginal people. As Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Don sponsored the Prohibition of Discrimination Act 1966 (SA) which prohibited race discrimination, including on the basis of skin colour and country of origin, in providing food, drink, services or accommodation, terminating employment and controlling land. This provided great controversy in the church and the community but also provided many opportunities to discuss the issues, advocate for their rights and also to stand against the racist opposition that was evident in many who opposed their right to drink in hotels. Such was the beginning of my ministry with First Australians.

Next real opportunity came in 1976 while working as a Recreation Officer in the High Rise Flats in Carlton. I had seen an advertisement for Community Work in the Victorian Methodist Newspaper. When I enquired I found it was the Aboriginal Advisory Development Service in Darwin which was seeking a Community Worker for the Missions in Arnhemland. I had previous experience with mining in Tennant Creek, 4 years of theological studies, a Certificate in Group Work and Social Studies, and my year in Port Augusta. All of which was seen as providing an acceptable background to be appointed as the first Community Adviser in the Waruwi Community on Goulburn Island, approximately 300km east of Darwin. This was part of the move from Mission Stations to Self-Governed Communities. Control shifted from the church to Community Councils under a policy that was known as 'Free to Decide'. The Waruwi Community also had shares in a mining venture, which included some of the key people that the Uranium Miners were seeking approval from to open mines in the area that would become the Kakadu National Park. My role was to assist the people to understand the nature of this mineral in their land which was called uranium. In order to negotiate with the lawyers of mining companies, they needed to understand the impact that mining might have on their land. This

whole concept was foreign to their understanding of land ownership and management. Not an easy task and a battle which sadly they failed to win. To this day I remember the grief and tears that came when news came on the airwaves that the Jabiluka contract had been signed. Community Advisors had been banned from attending the discussions and the venue for the discussions was kept secret.



These two radically different opportunities provided me with the privilege of what would now be known as diaconal ministry with our First Peoples. The first helped me to become aware of the poverty and racism that marred our relationship with these people and sadly an awareness that racism is not limited to those who are not Christian. There is still a strong need for deacons to raise awareness in the church of the social justice issues that are associated with our quest for reconciliation with the First Australians and our commitment to overcome poverty.

The two years I spent living in the Warruwi community made me continually aware that while I might be able to offer them advice on government requirements and assist them to relate to the dominant culture, there was a much larger responsibility to assist that dominant white culture to appreciate and hear what Indigenous people were saying to them. It was my privilege to walk their land with them and hear their stories. One unique responsibility I was given was to be alongside their minister and assist him to find his place in the Uniting Church. He helped me appreciate the value of storytelling. The value of those stories was particularly evident in the evenings I spent sharing in worship on the sandhills at an outstation where their own leaders shared the gospel stories in their own way and their own language. It gave me an appreciation of how valuable the training offered by Nungalingya College was. At the end of my time at Warruwi I spent 3 months doing a community development course at Nungalingya with two leaders selected by the Warruwi Community to take up my Community Advisor role.

Footnote: Recognition that I was a Deacon only came after I returned to Adelaide and spent another 3 years in Parkin-Wesley Theological College completing 'the requirements' for ordination. I still remember coming back to college and being allocated to the 'first year' group on my first day back at the college. The learning is, Don't wait for the church to recognise your ministry! Just grasp the opportunities that come and hope that in the process you will be able to assist the wider church to appreciate and embrace your ministry as their own.

Rev Deacon Bill Harris, in retirement but still active in diaconal ministry, August 3, 2020.

ARTICLE 3: Rev Bev Fabb (Deacon)

Australians for Reconciliation: Port Hedland, Western Australia

Port Hedland is a remote town on the north-west coast of Australia. Aboriginal people have lived here 'since the sun rose' creating many wonderful rock engravings. The traditional owners are the Karriyarri who called the place Marapikurrinya which describes the hand shape of the tidal creeks. The first non-Aboriginal settlers arrived in 1896 when a port was established to service the pastoral and gold mining industries of the Pilbara. Under the 1905 Aborigines Act, Aboriginal people were not allowed to live in town, except for two house girls who worked for white families. In the 1920s a fence was constructed along the town boundary, and Aborigines needed a ticket to cross this fence for work, but must leave town before the curfew at 6.00 p.m. This is the story of one town's attempt to bring about reconciliation between the original inhabitants and the new settlers.

History

Most Aboriginal people lived on the stations where men and women worked in return for rations. In 1946, Pilbara Aboriginal pastoral workers went on strike for better wages and conditions, the longest strike in Australian history. Strikers gathered in large camps outside Port Hedland and Marble Bar, supporting themselves by mining, collecting shells, selling skins and eating bush tucker. Although some strikers eventually returned to station life, many did not, preferring to support themselves through mining enterprises. Aboriginal people pioneered the mining and export of tin, tantalite and manganese in the Pilbara. From the profits of these ventures they purchased the leasehold on several pastoral properties which had become unviable after the withdrawal of cheap Aboriginal labour.

Port Hedland remained a sleepy town of about 300 people until the mid 1960s. The lifting of the Federal ban on the export of iron ore made possible the development of the huge iron ore deposits in the Pilbara. The construction of new mines, rail lines and port facilities created a boom in Port Hedland. Thousands of new people arrived, both short term construction workers and longer term residents. Among the new arrivals were many Torres Strait Islanders, who worked on rail construction, a community of Christmas Islanders, re-located due to the decline in phosphate mining, and many migrant workers from Europe. Port Hedland became a multicultural community.

Aboriginal people did not benefit from the mining boom. Even though they were the local people with mining expertise, the mining companies did not recognise this, and imported a workforce rather than employing Aboriginal people. At about the same time, the decision to award equal pay to Aboriginal pastoral workers resulted in many being forced off the stations. Aboriginal people, previously in full employment, suddenly found themselves unwanted in the labour market, living as fringe dwellers on the edge of a growing and prosperous town. A sense of hopelessness resulted, with a range of social problems.

Nowadays, Port Hedland is a multicultural community of about 15,000. Aboriginal people make up 20% of the population. The Karriyarri have been joined by other Pilbara tribal groups and Aboriginal people from other parts of the State. Language and culture are still very strong. While some Aboriginal people are now employed in government and industry, the Aboriginal community still suffers from higher than average unemployment rates. Itinerant groups from outlying communities, who live out in the scrub around town, sometimes create social tension, especially in relation to alcohol abuse and violence.

Port Hedland is a divided community, racially, culturally and economically. Many residents are

from overseas or interstate and have limited contact with or understanding of Aboriginal culture and history, and do not know how to go about building relationships with them. Racist attitudes are never far below the surface, and incidents of racial violence still occur.

When the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was formed in 1991, Rose Murray, a local Aboriginal woman was invited to be one of the inaugural members. Inspired by her involvement at a national level, Rose looked for ways to promote reconciliation locally. She found a supporter in Michelle Mackenzie, Manager, Community and Cultural Development for the Town of Port Hedland, who had lived for many years on a remote Aboriginal community.

In May 1997, they facilitated a public meeting in Port Hedland, in conjunction with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Local Aboriginal leaders were invited to speak on the eight key issues identified by the Council. The 300 people who attended this gathering decided to form a small working group to advance reconciliation in the town. Over the next year, the group was not able to gain momentum. Most of the members were local Aboriginal leaders or workers in Aboriginal organisations, who were busy dealing with the immediate concerns of the Aboriginal community, and had little time or energy left over for the work of reconciliation.

In April 1998, Rose and Michelle organised another workshop, facilitated by Tim Muirhead, the State director for the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. At this workshop, the reconciliation group was revitalised and expanded, and this time it took off.

There seem to be several reasons for this. First, it was recognised that it was unfair to expect Aboriginal people to drive the reconciliation movement. Their main priority was dealing with the needs of their own people. Educating the non-Aboriginal community and dealing with white racism had to be the responsibility of non-Aboriginal people. The new group worked hard to recruit non-Aboriginal members who were committed to reconciliation. A core group of about 12 was formed, with others willing to lend a hand when needed. The success of the group is due partly to the fact that among the core group were some key leaders in local government, community groups, arts networks, churches, local industry, and Aboriginal organisations.

Two Aboriginal women, Rose Murray and Sharon Todd, were core members of the group. Sharon is Karriyarra and worked for ATSIC. However, in order for the group to be successful, members worked hard to develop relationships with other Aboriginal people and organisations, in particular with the Marapikurrinya group, Wangka Maya - Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, the Pilbara Commission of Elders, ATSIC, the WA Aboriginal Affairs Department, and local Aboriginal organisations.

Second, the Town of Port Hedland agreed to be the auspice body for the reconciliation group. The Council gave access to council property for functions, managed the finances of the group, and allowed Michelle, a Council employee, to devote large amounts of work time to group activities. Michelle was particularly useful in alerting the group to funding opportunities. She wrote many submissions and was successful in gaining a lot of funding for reconciliation. As an unincorporated body it would have been difficult to access this funding without council auspice. The group got good support from the mayor, councillors and senior staff who always responded to invitations to attend and speak at reconciliation events.

Finally, there was an immediate focus for the group's activities. The inaugural Sorry Day event was approaching fast and the group decided its first activity would be to organise an event at the port in memory of the many Pilbara Aboriginal children who were taken away in State ships. About 200 people turned up on the day, including many Aboriginal people who had been personally touched by the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal people told their stories of loss, non-Aboriginal people expressed their sorrow, school children sang songs of hope, and many people signed the Sorry Book. The commemoration ended with flowers being thrown into the sea in

memory of the many children who had never returned. The event was successful. It enabled non-Aboriginal people to begin to understand the pain of the Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal people to feel that they had been heard and cared for. Buoyed by the success of this venture, the new group was eager for action.

The Reconciliation Group decided that its objectives were to increase understanding of local Aboriginal history and culture and promote better community relations. A variety of strategies have been used to achieve this goal.

Steps in the process

One of the first concerns of the group was the lack of cultural awareness courses for new teachers, hospital staff, police and social workers in town. We worked closely with Wangka Maya to get a cultural awareness program developed. The first course was held in October 1998, led by Aboriginal elders well versed in local history and culture. Many more have been held since, and now generate significant income for Wangka Maya. A sign of our success is that now cultural awareness courses are run regularly for government, industry and the local community. In 2002 the cultural awareness program was expanded to include bush outings with old people. One of the difficulties in working in this area has been tension about which organisations should take responsibility for cross-cultural training.

Another early decision was to produce reconciliation T-shirts. We paid a local Aboriginal artist to design a logo, and over the years have screen printed this on to hundreds of T-shirts, and more recently calico bags. We sell these to generate income for the group, but more importantly, to raise the profile of reconciliation in the community. This has proved very successful, with many people who are not actively involved in the group, promoting our activities by wearing our T-shirts.

Having started with a Sorry Day event, each year we have organised activities for Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week. These have included a display of the Sea of Hands, film nights, reconciliation concerts featuring local Aboriginal bands, services of prayer for reconciliation, street stalls, street marches, sausage sizzles, and a ceremony of commitment to reconciliation for government departments. The purpose of these events has been to raise community awareness of reconciliation and provide relaxed social events where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can mingle. We have organised several community education events, a Reconciliation Study Circle, a Native Title Seminar and most recently a Reconciliation Quiz Night. We run stalls at every community event giving away badges and show bags full of information about reconciliation.

We were glad when Port Hedland was chosen as the location for a regional consultation on the Draft Document for Reconciliation in 1999. Our group took responsibility for organising this event. Over 200 people, a good cross section of the community, turned up to have their say. But not content with holding a big public meeting, the group decided to take the Draft Document to community groups. Reconciliation group members in pairs, visited churches, service clubs, youth groups, RSL, community services, playgroups and sporting clubs, to tell them about the Draft Document and get their feedback. This was invaluable in raising the issue of reconciliation and provided opportunities to discuss misunderstandings and prejudice about Aboriginal people. One of our learnings was that older residents, who had lived and worked with Aboriginal people all their lives, had a great respect for them. The ones who were most racist in their attitudes were the younger people who had limited experience of Aboriginal people. As a result, we decided to put greater emphasis on working with young people.

From this process of consultation, one issue emerged as a major concern in the community. A few months prior, the manager of the local shopping centre had removed all the seats from the centre, because 'Aboriginal people sat on them and lowered the tone'. This act of blatant discrimination was deeply resented in the Aboriginal community. We decided that direct action was needed, and organised a number of sit-ins in the shopping centre, taking our own chairs. On each occasion we were thrown out by security guards, but not before we had collected a lot of signatures on a petition demanding return of the seats. We got support in this campaign from local senior citizens who had also been disadvantaged by the removal of the seats. In the end the seats were returned, but only after we went over the store manager's head to his boss in Perth.

In 2000, the group was able to secure a Federal government Local Symbols of Reconciliation grant. This enabled the publication of *Listen to the Old People*, a book of Pilbara Aboriginal oral histories. While a number of histories of the Pilbara had been written by white settlers, little had been written from an Aboriginal perspective. The stories had been taped 10 years before but Wangka Maya had not been able to publish them due to lack of funds. Care had to be taken to get consent for publication from all contributors and from the families of those old people who had died. Since that time Wangka Maya has been able to publish two more books, one with stories of the Stolen Generations and one of stories from Pilbara Aboriginal women, providing a valuable resource to improve community understanding.

The Symbols funding also enabled the publication of a brochure about Aboriginal history for tourists, the development of display boards on Aboriginal culture for the local museum, and the inclusion in the heritage trail of sites of significance to Aboriginal people. This honouring of Aboriginal history was important as Aboriginal achievements have too often been hidden and Aboriginal disadvantage denied.

The Symbols grant also funded the development of teaching notes for *Listen to the Old People* and subsidisation of the sale of class sets to schools. This fitted well with the group's emphasis on promoting reconciliation among younger people. Other activities included a reconciliation banner competition in the local primary schools, paying two artists to work with the children, and a poetry competition in the high school, with the winning poems being read on Sorry Day. From this project a group of teenagers asked if a youth reconciliation group could be formed in the high school. This ran for a while, but could not be sustained when teachers sympathetic to the project left town. But we were able to work with a local Youth Centre to run youth reconciliation workshops in 2001. Chris Lewis, the footballer, flew up from Perth for this event and was a big draw card!

Not all work for reconciliation has been done by our group, sometimes we simply supported initiatives by other groups which we believe promote better community relations. The proposal by the Pilbara Arts Craft and Design Aboriginal Corporation, Hedland Arts Council and the Town of Port Hedland to jointly establish an art gallery in town was strongly supported by our group. After a lot of lobbying, funding was finally gained from ATSIC, Commonwealth and State governments and the Council. The art gallery has provided a venue for indigenous artists to display their works, including two solo exhibitions by emerging Aboriginal artists and an exhibition of art from the remote Parngurr community. Recently the Art Gallery won a national award for its contribution to reconciliation.

One way to counter negative views is to celebrate Aboriginal achievement. The local cultural centre is named after Matt Dann, an early Aboriginal resident who made a significant contribution to the educational and cultural life of the town. However, few people now seemed to know who he was. We arranged for a plaque honouring his contribution to the town to be placed

in the centre. The movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* told the story of the courage of three Aboriginal girls from Jigalong, a Pilbara community, and starred a Port Hedland girl, Laura Monaghan. On the opening night in Port Hedland, we arranged for public acknowledgment of Laura, and messages to be written to the two old women whose story it told.

Outcomes

Some projects took a long time. At its first meeting in 1998, the group decided to work towards a monument in recognition of the 1946 Strike. It took years to secure funding, find artists to work on it, consult with Aboriginal people about the design, negotiate between various groups on the appropriate location, and finally construct the sculpture. At every stage there were problems to be overcome, and we began to wonder if the project would ever be complete. When the strike sculpture was launched by Premier Geoff Gallop in September 2002 it was a celebration not only of the achievement of Aboriginal workers, but also of the years of hard work that had gone into the project.

Another lengthy project was the recognition of Aboriginal contribution to the armed services. After years of negotiation with the local RSL branch, we were delighted when Hilary Saunders, an Aboriginal woman, was invited to speak about Aboriginal servicemen at the ANZAC Day service in 2002.

Despite our work, racist views are still sometimes expressed in town, leading us to wonder if our work was having an impact. We sensed attitudes were changing but could not be sure. It was the Bridge Walk that convinced us. In December 2000, Bridge Walks were organised in a number of capital cities, so we decided to have one in Port Hedland too. The plan was to meet at the old well, source of fresh water in the early days, walk across the only bridge in town, over a rail line, and finish with a sausage sizzle. We wondered if anyone would turn up and were amazed when 300 people, a real cross section of town, indicated their commitment to reconciliation by participating. The very next day, we discovered that we had won a national award from the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The words on the award read 'For promoting respect for Aboriginal peoples and organising numerous reconciliation events.'

Over time we began to see signs that our work was bearing fruit. The first gathering in 1997 had asked the Council to establish a Memorandum of Understanding with local Aboriginal people, and Council began the process to establish an Aboriginal Advisory Working Group. In 1999 the Town of Port Hedland won a Community Award for actively promoting the reconciliation process and encouraging harmony within the cultural diversity of our community. In 2002 the Council adopted a Statement of Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, signed an Indigenous Land Use Agreement with the Karriyarri people and recognised Peter Coppin, a local elder, as Freeman of the town. It is now common practice at all public events in Port Hedland to recognise the traditional custodians of the land. There is clear evidence that the town has changed.

Rev Bev Fabb (Deacon), in collaboration with Rose Murray, Sharon Todd and Michelle Mackenzie.

ARTICLE 4: Aunty Rev (Deacon) Denise Champion



Aunty Rev Denise Champion is an Adnyamathanha (Flinders Ranges) woman, theologian and Uniting Church minister, the first Aboriginal woman ordained (in any denomination) in SA (2015) and also the first Aboriginal woman to minister a mainstream congregation in South Australia. She says she wanted to try to restore faith and safety in her community as well as carry on the work of reconciliation.

"My faith has been challenged in many ways as I've seen desperate and broken-hearted people looking for comfort and help. As a messenger, I am able to carry the message of a healer of broken hearts. I have been challenged in my work in facilitating reconciliation between First and Second Peoples, to create a safe community. A community where people can come together, sit and talk, and experience healing and forgiveness for the past, finding a new destiny together. Having been in the church for a long time, I know the issues of justice that communities face. Through my Christian education, I've gained an understanding of holistic ministry. Bringing healing and wholeness to people is something I've always cherished. As an ordained minister, I know I am empowered by the Congress [the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress] to fulfil the mandate to have Aboriginal people ministering to other Aboriginal people."

Uniting Church SA Moderator Dr Deidre Palmer commented on the significance of Aunty Denise's ordination: "This is an historic moment in the life of the Uniting Church in South Australia as we move to ordain our first Aboriginal woman. Denise's work in growing our understanding of Aboriginal culture and spirituality will continue to contribute to reconciliation in our church and nation. Denise's ministry will continue to enrich all of our lives - not only in her current placement at Port Augusta UAICC congregation, but nationally, as she continues to equip and support the Church in its mission of justice and recognition of First Peoples."

Katherine Rainger reflects on the impact of Aunty Denise's ministry:

Aunty Denise's book, *Yarta Wandatha*, contains a theological method and a collection of theological reflections that bring together her Adnyamathanha culture and Christian faith. The voices of the psalmist, the prophets and Mary the mother of Jesus are interwoven with Aunty Denise's Adnyamathanha Muda (worldview). Rich images of Christ as precious Living Water are shared through her stories and her connection and concern for her people and her Country. Praise and lament, rejoicing and mourning, memory and history, echo through the pages of this very special book.

Yarta Wandatha affirms the deep knowledge that creation holds and speaks to us if we are ready to listen. *Yarta Wandatha* is a recognition of Adnyamathanha peoples' "long memory" of the Creator God in their stories and in their land (p.29).

Aunty Denise says, "I always say Australia is like one gigantic storybook. There's a story in every part of the land and sky and sea. When we, as Adnyamathanha, gather and tell our stories we always say *yarta wandatha* – 'the land is speaking.' We also say *yarta wandatha ikandadhna*: 'The people are speaking as if the land is speaking'. So the land is speaking to us and through us in these stories. There's a oneness there. We are not separated from the land our mother. We always talk about the land as our mother, which fits very closely with the story of Genesis of the Lord God forming humankind from clay" (p.19)

Because of Aunty Denise, I see God's activity through the creation of peoples, lands, lore and stories in this country we now call Australia. Because of her, I hear lament in the Australian landscape. I give thanks to God for Aunty Denise, for her gifts of faith, healing, storytelling, theological insight and teaching.

Aunty Rev Denise Champion on reconciliation.

Australia has a "beautiful history". She hopes we, as a nation, will one day uniformly embrace. National Reconciliation Week is a time to reflect on where we've been, where we are and, more importantly, where we are headed.

"Reconciliation Week is all about truth telling. It allows the truth to be told. Sometimes, things will happen that will make us stop and listen to the truth. If we are not listening to the truth, other things will continue to happen. And Aboriginal people know there are these things which have happened that have changed the way in which we can relate to one another. Things like the (revised) Preamble for the Uniting Church in Australia; that was a watershed document for us. There was truth telling in it. Also, it gave the opportunity for Second Peoples to say they were part of the problem – and that they were sorry. There was the apology in it. We seem to be able to remember the "war stories" very well, but we still have amnesia about what happened to Aboriginal people. People just want to hear what is pleasant, not the truth.

It's your history and it's your responsibility, each Australian, to know who you are. Most of Australia is built on the "ocker" image and colonial past and that's the only story (Second Peoples) kinda know. It's pretty sad. And they don't want to dig any deeper or go any further. Lying underneath, you've got all this beautiful history, beautiful stories of the land and how Australia was formed.

We are all different people, but we can live together as First and Second Peoples. And not only live together, we can share what we have together. "Reconciliation" means you can be different people, but live together in peace. You'll know how reconciled the Australian community is if you have truth telling and empathy. You can always find the things that divide, but uniting (also) doesn't mean conforming. You don't become like cookie cutters on a conveyor belt, all the same. It's actually the difference that makes the difference. So, when we can embrace

everyone's differences – and you may not agree with the way other's live – but at least find some commonality with them so that you can live in unity with them. Don't let the difference be the difference. I can truly say that because I learned to live the White Fella ways. I learned White Fella language, White Fella laws. I can do everything that a White Fella can do and I can still do my own stuff. I love my language and, for us, it's retrieving a lot of what has been lost. So, a reconciled community will allow freedom to retrieve what's been lost and we should already have a treaty. I don't know why the government is not giving us a treaty. Of the countries we know of that were colonised by the British, especially our close neighbours in New Zealand, they have a treaty with the First Peoples. I don't want to ask for a treaty anymore because we keep getting knocked back. The Uluru Statement from the Heart was a very profound document. It came after much thinking from Aboriginal leaders and yet, our Prime Minister didn't even give it a second thought. He just said no straight out.

We don't really have to spell out what ownership means to people. This land was stolen. First Peoples were prior owners. It may not have been in a document, written up all nicely in the archives of the parliament, but it was in our parliaments. But, of course, the way Western Peoples think of parliament and First Peoples think of parliament are two different things. It's the same thing as far as land ownership. (First European settlers) came out and saw 'nothing' with their Western eyes. All they saw was lots of land and trees and they couldn't see anything or anyone else. They immediately claimed it *Terra Nullius* – belonging to no one. They couldn't see nice little white picket fences or brick buildings, but the brush dwellings were there, that Aboriginal people lived in. They were always there.

It's not about the Aboriginal people getting over it and learning to live like everyone else. You can imagine that if you were wronged to the point of massive things like taking your kids and raping your women, you know you're not going to forget that in a hurry. You've got to be able to process that.

At the moment, Reconciliation Week is still "just an Aboriginal thing", let the Aboriginal people do their thing over there in the corner. Same as Australia Day. There is no coming together on Australia Day because the Aboriginal people will see that as a 'white thing'. My hope is that all Australians will begin to learn their true Australian identity. Learn Australia has a black past, and we have to embrace who we are fully, as a nation.

"We always need to hear the message that we are a reconciled community and we can live together, but that means embracing one another's stories. That means we make time to hear other people's stories too. I'm thinking of Multicultural Week and people who are "second generation" – they sound "Australian", but they don't look "Australian" – and we need to let them tell their story. It's not just about the black/white, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal. It's about being free to accept anyone who is different from us.

Australia has a real chance of building a community of peace. We are going a long way to it by being a multicultural society; we are able to embrace people from other cultures. But we must embrace the First Peoples first. We still don't do that well enough.

A lot of Aboriginal people have given up. They can't see any way forward, but I love the trilogy of *The Hobbit* because in that little story is a great message of hope. When Sam and Frodo are at the base of the mountain and Frodo's strength fails him, Sam says to him: "Well I can't do it for you, Mr Frodo, but I can carry you." So he picks up Frodo and starts to carry him to the top of the mountain. That's as good a picture of empathy as I can think of – someone who will pick you up and carry you through the hard times, until you are able to regain your strength. They are the kinds of communities we should have. We need to work towards building communities that are "helping communities". It's when you start seeing goodwill towards those who don't have

anything, that's the test of a true reconciled community.

Sharing Christian faith with First Peoples is difficult as a Minister because I have to go to my people – the Aboriginal people I am responsible for in my community – and still be able to speak the gospel of peace to them, telling them about Jesus. But the community folk still hold the church accountable for working side-by-side with government policies.

There are a lot of Aboriginal people who just don't want to talk about the Stolen Generations. It's too hard, with good reason, because they were traumatised as children. Just being taken away from their mum and dad, that's trauma enough. Never being allowed to play with your own brothers and sisters. So, it's very hard for me as a minister to go to them and say 'God loves you'. I do it because I do believe (and) I use my Indigenous thinking around matters of faith. I trust that, because it's been around a lot longer than 200 years. I trust Aboriginal spirituality that has been in this country as long as the First Peoples have been here. The same Creator that formed the mountains and the hills and the rivers and the valleys is the same God that is still here now, that gives people freedom.

Sources

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(This is an edited version of a story that was first published in Eternity News)

ARTICLE 5: Rev Michelle Cook (Deacon)

Michelle's first placement was as the Frontier Services minister at Weipa, and then as the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress minister at Mapoon, in Far North Queensland, an hour's drive from Weipa. She said she chose to work in the far reaches of the state because of a specific feeling that was where God wanted her. "I felt I needed to be pushed and I also wanted to experience life outside of where I had been for the first 30 years of my life". She reflects: "Living in Old Mapoon and seeing the resilience, joy, creativity and sharing in the sorrow and struggles of Old Mapoon people is just one reason I am passionate about *Walking Together as First and Second Peoples*. Michelle spoke about an Australian indigenous person from Mapoon who inspired her. "Her quiet dignity, generosity and her desire to share faith and culture with young people has been a great inspiration to me and my family as well as to the people of Old Mapoon".

In 2019, Michelle began a placement at Nungalinya College, teaching in the Certificate III/IV courses. Nungalinya is a training college for Aboriginal leaders.

In 2020, Michelle completed her doctoral thesis, "*On being a covenanting and multicultural church: Ordinary theologians in the Uniting Church explore what it means to be church*".

"Explorations in how to be a church with and for First Peoples explicitly reflects on the continuing legacy of invasion, dispossession and cultural genocide experienced by First Peoples. These examinations recognise that the churches of the colonisers were at best complicit, and at worst, active participants, in this legacy. The churches ran state dormitory systems that removed children from parents, participated in 'civilising' Indigenous peoples by insisting on Western cultural traditions, and enforced 'reservation' systems that severely curtailed freedom of movement and association of First Peoples. First Peoples were generally viewed by the society and the church as inferior and uncivilised peoples. Consequently, their cultures were perceived as having little to no redeeming features and, particularly, no connection to the Christian God. In the Australian context, this attitude towards First Peoples was intensified by the legal implications of 'terra nullius' and being properly occupied and utilised before the British invasion, and, therefore, available for annexation by the crown without negotiation with the original inhabitants. As Peter Lewis suggests, 'Australian history provides one chapter in the story of Empire's self-proclaimed right to rule over 'uncivilised peoples'. Recognising the influence of empire and the necessity of decolonization includes the recovery and development of Indigenous theology, the assertion that First Peoples have much to teach the Christian faith and the church, and suggestions for how the church in Australia can be a church for First Peoples. One part of the process of 'decolonising' is addressing the mixed experience of First Peoples in the church on missions and the early insistence that there is an inherent dissonance between Christianity and First Peoples' cultures. This is the primary task addressed by First Peoples and their allies when they study what it means for First Peoples to proclaim a Christian faith and belong to the Christian church in Australia. Drawing on Aboriginal spiritualities to interpret, critique and dialogue with the Christian traditions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders offer their own way of being Christian and of being church".

In one of Michelle's sermons, when she was a Deacon in placement at St Luke's Weipa (a cooperative placement with the Anglican Church of Australia) and patrol minister in Cape York for Frontier Services, she reflected on Luke 19.1-10. This is an excerpt from her sermon.

"When I come down to Brisbane I usually spend a lot of time eating meals with family and old friends. Hospitality abounds – food, wine, conversation. Sometimes it is a foretaste of that

welcome and hospitality that I know heaven will look like – a foretaste of what the reign of God will be. Conviviality, love, laughter, joy - a meal that goes on forever without indigestion.

Meals are important. They are an overlap between a public and private space – sharing meals can be an intimate expression of care and love for those at the table.

But it gets me thinking about who I actually eat with. Who do I share this care and love with?

How do I express hospitality to those around me?

And when I think about who I share our family table with this story of Zacchaeus and the other meal stories in the gospel of Luke challenge my understanding of private and public space.

About who I allow in to the private space of my life and who I acknowledge publicly – but don't necessarily share the rest of my life with.

For example, as a minister, as a Christian – we know we are to sit with the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, point to the liberation that comes in Christ – Luke 4:19-20 – but do we show this solidarity only in public spaces – ie in protests, in Christmas child giving, etc ?

Do we let this infiltrate our private space – our meal tables, our friendship groups – or are they supposed to be exempt from this Christian calling?

The story of Zacchaeus is familiar to most of us – the almost comical story of the short man who climbs a sycamore tree – a tree whose pods were used to feed the pigs – who, when called upon by Jesus, pays back money and gives it to the poor – and then gets an uninvited guest for dinner.

But we can easily lose sight of what it meant for Jesus to publicly and privately associate with such a man.

When we look around the story of Zacchaeus in Luke we see that it takes place in the middle of stories about widows, children, tax collectors and the blind. What do all these types of people have in common? Well, they were either counted as worthless and reviled by their compatriots; or they were easily ignored and avoided. The widow and the children were not important; the tax collector was a legitimate gangster – in cahoots with the Roman oppressors. The blind and the lame – their infirmities singled them out as cursed by God and they couldn't earn a living except through begging. They were the ones no-one listened to. They were the ones that people avoided. And they were the ones that got what Jesus was one about

The religious authorities didn't get the message of Jesus – they thought they understood what God wanted of them. It was the lowly and despised that understood the love, grace and humility that comes from a right relationship with God.

Zacchaeus of course is a tax collector – the legitimate gangster of the day. He was someone that everyone wanted to get on well with – because he was in charge of who got taxed and how much. But they didn't like him – in fact he was viewed as a traitor. But who did Jesus call out of the tree, who did Jesus call out of the crowd – the one who was feared and despised.

In response to this call – to this self-invitation to dinner – Zacchaeus said to Jesus, look I will give all I have to the poor and pay back anyone I have cheated. And Jesus said salvation has come to your house today.

Now apart from Zaccheus perhaps being surprised at having an uninvited guest – I bet he wasn't the only surprised one in the crowd that day.

The Scripture says that all who saw it began to grumble and said Jesus has gone to be a guest of one who is a sinner.

Everyone who saw it grumbled –this grumbling usually happened when Jesus was seen as being too gracious toward sinners. And the grumbling was done by those in the crowd –those who wanted to see Jesus – who were interested and even following his progress.

This anticipated meal – this inviting of Jesus to be the guest of one who is a sinner – really challenges our understanding of who should respond to Jesus – who is worthy to be at the table eating with the Son of God.

It asks us questions about our expectations of our lives as Christian disciples together – our lives as church. Who am I sharing my life with? Who are we sharing our lives with?

So while I was thinking about this sermon I came up with questions – and I realised I was taking the part of the grumbler – ie the one who is already part of the community of faith questioning the wildness and unpredictability of the one I am following. So these questions are the questions I think Jesus continually throws at us older children.. the ones that call us to the radical life that Jesus has in mind for the community of faith.

These are questions that I came up with:

Who do we expect to respond to God's calling? Who do we want to respond to God's calling?

This is a useful question when we are thinking about how to share our faith with others.

When we plan mission, when we think about expanding the church through sharing our faith – what types of people do we invite to come to this table?

This place which is both public and private – where we share many things in common and where we are called to admit to our vulnerability and brokenness and our wish for transformation of ourselves and of our society.

Who do we invite? Who do we want to respond to God's call?

Is it the vulnerable? Is it the feared and despised?

I think too often we want people to respond who are just like us – people who won't force us to change; people who don't necessarily challenge our own way of thinking or believing or being disciples. We want to grow community clones.

What we see in the gospels, however, is that the people who responded, the people who became the church in Acts – were from many different places and backgrounds. They were rich, they were poor, they were Gentiles and Jews, they were male and female –slave and free – but they were drawn together by Christ through the eruption of the Holy Spirit. They had conflict but they sought to address it; they tried to exclude certain people from the table but were called back to the message of Jesus.

The other questions I got from this passage were: Who do we understand as being worthy of God's call? Ourselves – others. This points us to two different aspects of the good news: First that God sees me as worthy of God's love and call; second, that God sees everyone else as worthy of God's love and call as well.

This challenges us on so many levels – but primarily it says to us:

that everyone of us falls short of God;

that everyone of us is loved by God;

that everyone of us is able to be transformed by God – to be turned around and led into God's ways.

SO what has that got to do with meals?

I realised last year that I was resenting our house being a drop in centre for all the young people in town. All these kids coming and taking over the television, the food, the house, the music.

But then I was confronted by the need of these kids – who want someone to listen to them – a place to hang out and not be bothered, A place where they can ask questions about God; where they can admit mistakes.

And then I realised that the people I have invited to dinner –those I have asked to share our table with us have been the usual people – people who are like me – people who I don't have to work hard to have a conversation with.

And interestingly that means not many black faces. Not many people who are too different to me. Why? Because my meal table is my personal space – I don't want to have to pretend to like people there.

And that is where this falls over –that is where I am confronted with the questions:

Who do I expect or want to respond to God's call?

Who do I think is worthy of God's call?

If I can't even invite to dinner those I know God loves – then how is my life demonstrating God's love and welcome to all people?

And significantly – how am I letting God transform me? How am I allowing God to get into the places in my life that I want to keep the same? And actually open me up to the life lived in God's hospitality, that welcomes even me into God's world and ways.

<https://terce.wordpress.com/2010/11/18/31st-sunday-in-ordinary-time-year-c-31-october-2010/#more-1811>



ARTICLE 6: Rev Dean Whittaker (Deacon)

South Australia's Proclamation Day Ceremony reflections 2016

I write this in my role as a non-Aboriginal Pastor in an Aboriginal church. I come from a place of Christian faith, and of a deep covenantal relationship with some First People in this country. South Australia was established later than the other colonies. It was one of the last colonies established by Great Britain, and Britain was trying to demonstrate it had learnt something from previous mistakes. Britain chose not to just pretend there was no-one here ('terra nullius'). The Letters Patent that established the colony of South Australia paid significant attention to the first peoples of this country.

In the Letters Patent, King William IV said that, on one hand, the land where the colony was to be established consisted of waste and unoccupied lands which are supposed to be fit for the purposes of colonisation. On the other hand, that nothing in the Letters Patent shall "affect or be construed to affect the rights of any Aboriginal Natives of the said Province to the actual occupation or enjoyment in their own Persons or in the Persons of their Descendants of any Lands therein now actually occupied or enjoyed by such Natives".



It was fascinating to be there standing with the protestors, Aboriginal people and their supporters, on one hand, a reminder of the breaking of the proclamation, and on the other hand, an invitation for the government and the people to be true to the intent of the Letters Patent. The Proclamation in 1836 did not establish South Australia - that had already been done in

Britain. But it was a declaration of the intentions and hope for the future of this colony, a free colony, unlike the others in this land.

The Governor, His Excellency, Hieu Van Le, was a wonderful choice for reading this declaration: In announcing to the Colonists of His Majesty's Province of South Australia, the establishment of the Government, I hereby call upon them to conduct themselves on all occasions with order and quietness, duly to respect the laws, and by a course of industry and sobriety, by the practice of sound morality, and a strict observance of the Ordinances of Religion, to prove themselves worthy to be the founders of a great and free Colony.

It is also, at this time especially, my duty to apprise the Colonists of my resolution, to take every lawful means for extending the same protection to the NATIVE POPULATION as to the rest of His Majesty's Subjects, and of my firm determination to punish with exemplary severity all acts of violence or injustice which may in any manner be practiced or attempted against the natives, who are to be considered as much under the safeguard of the law as the Colonists themselves, and equally entitled to the privileges of British Subjects.

I trust therefore, with confidence to the exercise of moderation and forbearance by all Classes, in their intercourse with the Native Inhabitants, and that they will omit no opportunity of assisting me to fulfill His Majesty's most gracious and benevolent intentions towards them by promoting their advancement in civilisation, and ultimately, under the Blessing of Divine Providence, their conversion to the Christian Faith.

By His Excellency's Command, ROBERT GOUGER, Colonial Secretary, Glenelg, 28th December, 1836 GOD SAVE THE KING.

This is a remarkable proclamation. There is nothing like it in any of the other States (or colonies, as they were originally) in Australia. This was the first public statement of the invaders - that they would acknowledge the presence of First people, protect the rights of the First people, and make available to them all the privileges of being British subjects, and calling all the new arrivals to honour and respect the First peoples' rights. To hear the words read out afresh struck me as both a confession of terrible failure - and a gracious invitation to repentance and a new beginning as a State, and as individuals.

Now these were just words. In many ways the actions and decision-making of the colonial leadership and colonists totally failed to live up to the high calling expressed on Proclamation Day. But they were words backed up by the colonising power, and spelt out by the King, and echoed by the leadership of the colony. They were words with legal weight. They cannot be unsaid. They cannot be denied. They cannot be ignored.

At some point this State must address the question: How have we been true to the God-given calling and intention for our state in terms of its honouring of, and respecting the rights of its First people encapsulated in the King's words?:

This is an important question about our shared past, our shared present and our shared future. Are we just going to play with words? Or are we going to live out the moral, ethical and spiritual meaning of those words?



The use of “The Old Gum Tree” for the ceremony is also fascinating. The bent trunk of the tree can both:

Symbolise judgement – just as the tree which intended to grow straight and tall, instead was weighed down and bent over back to the ground and becoming permanently that way. Perhaps this is the image of our State due to its unwillingness to live up to its own promises and dreams for First people, and its betrayal of them.

Symbolise hope – a tree which has tried to grow tall has, struggled over a long time, and in the end instead returned to the earth, the starting point. Perhaps this symbol represents our State going back to the beginnings and the earth, and examining the failings and betrayals at the beginning, and since – with the hope of rectifying things. In doing so the whole plant has changed direction, as I believe our State, and nation, must.

I dream that in a few years time the Proclamation Day Ceremony will be planned by a group where First people have hosting authority about all decisions in their land and are given honour and respect for what they say and want. Where third people who have come from other places that don't originally have English as their first language are equal participants with the dominant culture members on their own terms are key organisers as well. My dream would be that some First people acting as hosts, and Third people as valued contributors, with the assistance of dominant culture folk who have respect for the special place and role of First people, and an ability to really listen to Third people – make the decisions about how the ceremony happens, what is said and done, and where it leads to. My bigger hope is that such an arrangement would reflect the reality of how our whole State and nature of relations between First people and later comers had changed for the better!

Source: <https://deanwhittaker.wordpress.com>

Dean has long been an advocate on a number of issues impacting Aboriginal people:

Mining issues in Jabiru (Arnhem Land, Northern Territory).

Dean is also a great encourager, and was one of the people who provided encouragement for Chris Haynes in completing his doctoral thesis, *Defined by contradiction: the social construction of joint management in Kakadu National Park* (2009).

The controversial Hindmarsh Bridge (South Australia), when Dean was part of a strong campaign in support of Ngarrindjeri people in opposition to the bridge. In November 1996, over 1,000 people packed Adelaide's Maughan Church to hear the Ngarrindjeri story, and days later hundreds of people participated in 'The Long Walk' from Adelaide to Goolwa in which Indigenous and non-indigenous people walked 90 km together in six days of sharing and learning. In 1997, Dean was sued for defamation (District Court Action No. 310 of 1997) by the developers of the marina on Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island). This case began after Dean's "letter to the editor" was published in the local Strathalbyn newspaper, the Southern Argus, alleging that the developers failed to properly consult Aboriginal people in the planning and approval process of the bridge. Although a number of supporters had legal action against them, none of it was directed at Ngarrindjeri people or organisations. This may reflect the developers' view of the political processes at work. It also meant a white court was pronouncing on matters significant to the Ngarrindjeri, without actually hearing from Ngarrindjeri people themselves, precisely because the issue at trial was whether there was validity in the defamation allegations, not whether Ngarrindjeri claims were true.

Dialysis

Dean has been an advocate to address the chronic shortage of dialysis services for Aboriginal people in remote areas while at the same time provided pastoral support to First peoples, especially those who had to travel to Adelaide for treatment. He spoke out when the free shuttle transport provided by the Federal Government for Aboriginal dialysis patients in Adelaide was threatened. The funding had come from its Closing the Gap program, which aims to increase life expectancy by improving access to primary care for Aboriginal people. SA Health has tightened the rules for transport and will now only provide support for patients who pass a disadvantage test outlined in their transport policy. A subsequent stand-off between state and federal health authorities over who should fund the service has left the end-stage renal disease patients vulnerable and worried about their future.

The print media reported 'Uniting Church Reverend Dean Whittaker said he was shocked when members of his congregation told him the shuttle for dialysis appointments would stop. "I'm absolutely convinced this will result in death," Reverend Whittaker said. "Most of the Aboriginal people getting dialysis are not from here and because of this they don't have lots of structures around them to support them getting to dialysis. The reality is that if they don't have dialysis, they will die."

Dean has a small team of staff and volunteers at Salisbury UAICC who provide a range of transport, counselling and other services. The gatherings at the church provide a place where problems can be discussed and from which issues can be taken up with appropriate government or other agencies. In his pastoral role Dean visits Anangu in their homes and hospitals when they are facing crises and supports them during court appearances.

Black Deaths in Custody

Dean has been very engaged in seeking justice in relation to the death of Wayne Fella Morrison, a Wiradjuri, Kookatha and Wirangu man, who died in police custody on 26th September, 2016 from reasons including spit-hood and restraint. Since 1991, 432 Indigenous Australians have died in custody. The police officers accused of his death have refused to give evidence.

ARTICLE 7: Rev Sophie Lizares (Deacon)

Sophie was originally a journalist from the Philippines before migrating to Australia. In February 2015, when she was still a Deacon candidate, Sophie joined a pilgrimage of about 30 people on Adnyamathanha country, 430kms north of Adelaide, led by Aunty Denise Champion, a Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress elder (and now Uniting Church Deacon). This is Sophie's recollection of the pilgrimage.

“You asked about how to approach Aboriginal people,” said Aunty Denise Champion as she picked up our conversation from several days ago. “This is how,” she says, as together we step onto a path leading to a low circular monument. It was a sinuous rust stone carving that mimicked the two snakes of Ikara (Wilpena Pound), the vast geological monument that surrounded us. There were no barriers, no instructions, no protocols, just a stone marker at the mouth of the path announcing, “*Ngarlparlaru yata*”.

“This is our country,” Denise translated, as we walked the two-toned gravel walk that wound its way to the centre. In the Aboriginal world, nothing is direct, the subtleties confound. I am saved by the saying, ‘relationship before stories before questions’ - a way so counter-intuitive to the journalist in me. At the brown centre of the monument, however, no words were minced: “We lost our traditional way of life to pastoralism and our land to pastoralism - and adapted to an alien culture, a new language and religion.”

In 1948, the Adnyamathanha elders, deciding that they could not live in two worlds, ended their ceremonial lives and adopted Western ways. Many were granted ‘Certificates of Exemption’ which was a licence to live in a white man’s world. It allowed an Aboriginal person to enter town, vote, and send their children to the local school. Certificates of Exemption were seen by authorities as a key to ‘assimilation’, but could be withdrawn at any time. To get one, you were forced to renounce your culture, language and family who were still living on missions and reserves.

The ‘dog licence’ was another name for Certificates of Exemption, which Aunty Denise’s Dad was granted. She recalled: “I felt so bad. If the missionaries heard us kids speaking our language, they would refuse to sell our mother groceries at the store. She would have to wait for the next week or travel to the next town to buy flour and sugar. After years of pastoral settlement, our traditional life has disappeared.”

Embedded on the ground are crosses, horseshoes, and a length of barbed wire that cuts across. Even for me, it is painful, the line between prison and freedom. Earlier, Aunty Denise had asked us to remember Adnyamathanha place names – Vandha Urthanha, Yura Bila, Ngurri Madlanha. But here, she gives no name for this memorial. She refers to it simply, in English, as the ‘National Park Rangers Quarters’.

“Anhangha idla ngukanandhakai,” Aunty Denise recalls her father saying, ‘I am going back to this place now’. “Wanangha nai?” ‘And where are you going’, her mother would respond, as she must to keep the story alive. “I am going to a special place in my mind,” her dad would say and together they would converse about a special time and place, weaving new aspects to the story as they told it to their children. Thus the Pilgrimage is also for Adnyamathanha elders, Aunties Denise, Pauline and Noleen so they could take their daughters and grandchildren on country

too. They now live in the settlements of Hawker or Port Augusta. Rangers have fenced out sacred rocks for health and safety reasons.

As we travel through country, the aunties will not let us have paper and pencil to write on. Look, listen, they instruct. It could be a matter of life or death. They take turns telling creation stories and naming plants and their nutritional and medical properties. They ask us to say the names after them and leave blanks in the stories for us to fill out. One is about Aldyanada, the Barking Lizard, and Adu, the Bearded Dragon and why the sun rises in the east, told just as the sun is rising. The stories are written on the land and in memory. It is on country where the stories become alive. They are stories of orientation without which one is lost, stories of accountability and co-operation. For them to live on, they need to be retold afresh, like winter floods washing the roots of trees in the dry creek beds.

Aunty Denise has broken with tradition and has written a paper and ink book - *Yata Wandatha* - with colour photographs. In it, her people's stories become parables of a faithful God who searches for lost children. They are stories of vulnerability and hospitality on land that is a sacred storybook and where if one listens deeply, there might be no need for questions.

Source

<https://revivemagdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/dsc00921-web.jpg>

ARTICLE 8: *Rev Jesse Size (Deacon) and Deacon candidate Chelsea Size work closely with the UAICC in South Australia. Jesse was ordained a Deacon on 12th May 2018.*

Through Jesse's ministry, seven young adults from Port Augusta participated in the Period of Discernment weekend at the Uniting College of Leadership and Formation (SA). Some of these participants became students of the College, and undertook Certificate 4 subjects with weekly mentoring by Jesse.

Congress employs Chelsea Size as the UAICC Youth Ministry Training and Formation Coordinator to help youth and young adults grow in their faith and discipleship. Chelsea provides mentoring and pastoral guidance so that participants can explore their sense of call and gain skills and knowledge.

Rhaneé Tsetsakos, an Adnyamathanha woman and member of the UAICC, reflects on the special relationship with Jesse and Chelsea: My husband John and I have been doing life with Jesse and Chelsea since moving to Port Augusta a few years ago. Their love and care towards us, have enriched our lives greatly, and the support they have given us, in not only my health journey, but John's journey with immigration and gaining his permanent residency here in Australia, has allowed us to be together, support each other, and strengthen our relationship. The beauty of how our lives have intertwined and connected us all on a deeper level, is proof that the key ingredient to Reconciliation is love and a deep desire to care for one another. This ensures that we are able to experience a fullness of life, one where we can all flourish and thrive".

Jesse and Chelsea post reflections on <https://theopentable.tumblr.com>. Here is one that reflects on 'The Great Interruption' (Luke 1:68-79).

Zechariah is an old man. He has no children, and no reason to think that he might be able to bring life into the world. And then, out of the blue, while taking up his once-in-a-lifetime priestly duties, he experiences the Great Interruption (Luke 1:5-20). The Great Interruption can happen to any of us. We don't make it happen. We can only wait, wait upon the holy. All we can do is make our way into the sacred spaces. God does the rest. For Zechariah the Great Interruption came in the form of an angel who explains that his (old, barren) wife will bear a son named John who will prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah is stunned. He can't get his head or heart around it. This one is too far outside of everything he has experienced and known. He's only known silence. His people had gotten used to silence – it's what they've known on the God-front for hundreds of years. Defined by exile, Zechariah's closed-up imagination draws him into his people's silence in a profoundly personal and experiential way:

18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." (Luke 1:18-20, NRSV)

Zechariah's Great Interruption is followed up with another Great Interruption: *the grace of silence*. Often silence in the Christian tradition is spoken of with a bit of romantic idealism. We make reference to Jesus' habit of slipping away in the early hours for profound renewal, those *dadirri* movements where the deep things of God call out the deep places within us. That's one

aspect of silence. Another is what we encounter here with Zechariah, no less a grace, but not necessarily one we would choose. Great Interruptions rarely are. And especially in this case - Zechariah was struck silent at the same time that he was called into his position of leadership. At the time when it was his turn to speak he was instead forced to sit in silence, to listen, to wait upon the holy.

Perhaps this is the point. We get used to the sound of our own voices. If we've been talking for a while it easily becomes part of our identity. We become expert-talkers with titles that suggest as much. Or sometimes we don't need them. Gender, education and cultural background far too often determine who is given voice, who has leadership, whose is expert, who is host.

But in this narrative something surprising happens. Zechariah is silenced as if to demonstrate profoundly that his male, priestly leadership is of no real need for the purposes of God to be carried out, and that perhaps his own imagination-and-experience-boxes could even be limiting factors. Elizabeth will play her part in bringing life into the world, Zechariah will have a front-row seat.

It's been a little like that for us coming to Port Augusta, particularly nestling into the Port Augusta Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress church. Pretty early on in the piece we hit the limits of our imagination-and-experience-boxes. It's been a season to speak far less and listen far more. There are strong leaders here who play their part in bringing life into Port Augusta. We get a pretty good seat, and in the process we've been formed in wonderful ways, formed in silence.

I wonder what kind of influence Zechariah's silence would have on his life. How would this silence shape his understanding of God and God's dream for the world? How would this silence form him as a human being? How would this silence impact the song that he has to sing?

Zechariah's silence wasn't forever. With the birth of his son, Zechariah's silence is finally broken and filled with the Holy Spirit he bursts into song. Zechariah's jubilant song speaks of a God who comes as visitor:

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people..." (v68)*

*"Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,
To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace." (vv78-79, NASB)*

Zechariah's God comes in a particular way. Zechariah speaks of the God who comes into the world he created as a visitor, as a guest. In Luke's Gospel, as Brendan Byrne articulates, the whole life and ministry of Jesus can be understood as a "visitation" on God's part to Israel and the world:

'From the start this raised the question: how will this guest, this visitor be received? The crucial point is that those who do receive him find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality: the "hospitality of God". The One who comes as a visitor and guest in fact becomes

host and offers a hospitality in which human beings and, potentially, the entire world, can become truly human, be at home, can know salvation in the depth of their hearts' (Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, p.4)

Perhaps Zechariah's experience has offered a unique glimpse into the unfolding purposes of God. Zechariah, formed in silence, seems to grasp something special about God. He's come to learn about a God who doesn't need to come as host, who instead comes as guest. What the whole story will show is that in Jesus' coming as guest/visitor he offers something profoundly life-giving to those who receive him. Somehow in receiving Jesus the Guest we find ourselves drawn into the hospitality of God and in turn we come home to ourselves, entering into a new experience of security, wholeness and peace that allows us to discover new capacities for being in the world. Drawn into the hospitality of God we ourselves can become free to enter the world as Christ did, as guests and visitors rather than as hosts.

Perhaps in Zechariah's song we can detect the kind of grace his silence has offered him, a capacity and a willingness to redefine his own host presence and status in line with a God who comes into the world in the form of a servant, visitor, guest.

This is a new understanding of hospitality, an understanding that can only be formed in silence and humility. It's also an understanding crucial for non-indigenous people in Australia to engage with, and according to Chris Budden, one that must become the model for the church's life and relationships:

'It is about being open to the other, with the hope and expectation that as we offer others welcome they will become the hosts who open for us a new way of being in the world. We are not doing a favour for others, but allowing the one who is visitor to be host. Indeed, in Australia one of the challenges for Second peoples is to recognise that they are not the hosts but guests – uninvited guests – on Aboriginal land. The challenge is how we become guests, and allow Indigenous people to properly be hosts' (Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*, pp.164-165)

My friend and work colleague is gracious enough to say to me from time to time, "You know you whitefellas just need to stop talking sometimes!" She's right. I'm so trapped in what I think I know, in my own experience. I need to keep being formed in silence, I need to appreciate the joy of having a front-row seat to what God is doing in and through Aboriginal communities. This is the grace of silence.

The challenge of being the church in Australia involves finding new ways for First and Second peoples to be home together – ways that challenge existing power dynamics, the racism and paternalism that still marks our country and sadly our church. We need new ways that involve true listening and learning, ways that enables new leadership to flourish and guide the church into places beyond our imagination-and-experience-boxes. Our mutual-liberation, as Aboriginal activist and educator Lilla Watson expresses, is found in these new ways of being:

"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

What would it really mean if we were able to come as guest, formed in silence, willing to be shaped by a different dream for the world? Would this change the song we have to sing? Are we

ready for the Great Interruption? May we come with openness and humility as guests, ready and willing for our lives, particularly our life together as the church, to be transformed by our hosts as we find new ways of being home together.

Source

<https://theopentable.tumblr.com/post/134617312361/the-great-interruption>



Article 9: Deacon candidate Olly Ponsonby: Notes from a prison chaplain's journal

For 18 months I was privileged to be first, a student chaplain in Yatala and Mobilong prisons, then later, a Uniting Church commissioned pastor serving in prisons while candidating for the ministry of deacon. The majority of the men I saw were younger than me and Aboriginal. The other chaplains would use the term 'client' to refer to the prisoners they spoke with, but I never felt comfortable with that word. It suggested some sort of bias in our encounters which was never the case. I wasn't there like a lawyer or social worker to bring solutions or advice; I just wanted to sit with the men, and be present to their stories. Stories of injustice. Injustice within a system that on most days I couldn't conceive quite *how they could ever win...*

Besides, if there was any bias – these men were the experts and *I was their client*. They lived and knew and understood their disadvantage and lack of opportunity, and I was the student to their experience and the stories that they chose to share.

I have been looking through journal entries and reflections during my time serving in prison and thinking about some of the men.

Journal entry

There are moments each day when I sit in the unit and no one approaches me to talk. I may catch someone's eye, or they may nod their head in passing. But there is no conversation. I have ears to listen, a shoulder to lean on, a heart fully committed to this ministry, but right now in this moment I find myself quiet, solitary and waiting.

I'm on the starting blocks, ready to run the race, to go into the all the world, but these moments call for waiting and patience. *There must be a lesson here.*

These men know about silence. The silence that follows the rejection of family and friends.

Maybe I know something of this too. Maybe I could know more.

Let me feel more, before you honour me with your story.

These men know about waiting. About counting time.

Let me understand more, before you share your story with me.

I am an apprentice here... and it is "humbling to be in a space where I... still have so much to learn." And "to learn *with my heart* – not my head". This takes time.

Let me walk before I run.

And in these quieter moments between the conversations, against the background narrative of incarceration, separation from loved ones, and whatever stories have placed these men inside – *may my humble, silent presence still be a reminder of God's faithful presence.*

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock". No forced entry. An invitation to communion.

Behold I sit at this table. No forced entry here. An invitation to communion. In your time, not mine. Your agenda, not mine. Your story, not mine.

Let me be content in the silence.

Let these times prepare the soil for future rain.

There were days when the grief in their stories was laid bare in all its rawness and striking honesty. No hiding behind smooth words or comfortable facades. Pain, carried from generation to generation, cumulative, sometimes angry, sometimes resigned.

One man with whom I still correspond used to show me the scars on his body. I still remember the first time we met. He had been severely bashed in prison the week before and his face was swollen and blue and the white of one eye was completely red. He had come for the church service. And as I stood before him administering the Holy Communion, I couldn't help but think of Jesus' bruising and his wounds. I remembered how Jesus identifies with the least among us,

his gut wrenched from compassion and solidarity and understanding. And I prayed that this would be the beginning of protection and recovery and restoration for this dear man. But over the 18 months or so that followed, I watched as life grew harder for this man who had arrived in prison with a gunshot wound, and for whom violence and threat were a constant fact of life. This man – *my friend* – with no father to speak of, a history of drug abuse, a life careering off the rails, and nobody (he thought) to catch him at the bottom. I remember one day heading to the infirmary to meet him. I had heard the harrowing details of a brutal attack from another prisoner earlier that day, and found myself hoping that my friend hadn't been the victim. *God please. Not him!* And then feeling guilty for wanting it to be somebody else... The terrible, messed-up economy of care and violence in prison.

Journal entry

Smith's essay on preaching is speaking so profoundly to me... "I have never spent Easter in a place of such crucifixions", says Smith, of an experience that has confirmed for her how preaching is contextual, de-centred, and by invitation. So too, my prison conversations. "There are no clerical robes here". I wear purple among a thousand wearing green. For my safety. Though my concern is *for them*. It is their place. I am their guest. I am invited. "The priests sit among the people". I walk or sit among the prisoners. My name badge is visible. They know my name and recognise my face. Sometimes they let me know their names. Sometimes they share their stories.

I walk among a thousand crucifixions.

"My dad abused me."

"The RSPCA took my dog."

"They think I tried to kill my wife."

"It was my eleven-year old's birthday yesterday. I'm not allowed to speak to her."

"I have surely seen the affliction of My people... I am aware of their sufferings."

Sometimes a man lets me see his suffering and his scars. A "holy invitation to grieve and weep."

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

I limit my words. I nod and grunt and listen. An occasional *Lord have mercy* under my breath. I know there are tears in my eyes at times. Tears exposing a common humanity.

"You, you stay here with me, okay?"

I lean in, tracing a fine line between being present or retreating to make space for their story and their pain. I want my presence to "lead [them] to restoration, mending, and re-remembering". But how can you be re-remembered if no one knows your story?

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" God knows.

"We must know before we love"

So many crucifixions. "I am overcome and overwhelmed." Undone. But like Simon of Cyrene, I will carry your cross for a short while, if you ask me to. I will know you. *I know* it is a sacred gift you offer. Maybe together we can know a resurrection.

One man I met regularly was simple and gentle and kind. He liked to pause before answering every question. As if he was looking at my question on the table between us, walking around it, seeing it from all sides before eventually responding. And I would think to myself, 'how ever did he cope with police questioning or with court appearances?' Time and process seemed so different to him. I remember one day he shook my hand and sat down, then said, *I want to go back and sit in the window in the sun*. He left, and the words of the Aaronic blessing came to

mind. A world moving too fast for this man trapped in a prison system that affords too few moments of sunshine.

I remember another encounter with a group of indigenous men at a different prison. They were sat, some on the bank and others on a bench together in the sunshine. Some nodded as I approached. "Beautiful day!" I said, referring to the weather. For a moment I'd forgotten where we were... But they were gracious, one man saying, "the grass, fresh air, isn't it... [*then nodding towards the unit*] No good for us being in there."

One Aboriginal man told me he just wanted to be with his nan to spend some time before she died. He had heard it may be soon.

Yet another Aboriginal man told me he just wanted to be in the Coorong fishing. "When I get out of here, what say we go fishing? You and me. I'll teach you..."

Yet another Aboriginal man told me he wanted to go up to Pirie with his mum to see where his brother had been buried. "I don't remember any of it", he said, thinking back to the drugs that had clouded or erased the memories of the spiraling months immediately prior to arrest.

The grace of these men! All of them strangers in prison's strange land, yet singing the Lord's songs of nature and family and community and remembrance to a different rhythm of time. All of them teaching me, encounter by encounter, moment by moment, something deeper about time and place and connection.

Journal entry

Likewise, God cannot be rushed or grasped in a single sitting. *The whole world cannot contain all that could be written about God.* "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them [all] now." The journey into God is a staged movement – "The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind." And yet, we are invited to seek and to knock, confident that God will reveal Godself to us and that we will find God. That God, who is at once ineffable is mysteriously also the God we grow to confess - and grow into relationship with, as child and friend and lover. These relationships are not instant, developing as we draw near, and God draws near to us. And we discover that God has "humbly bent down and lifted the dust of our nature' into unity with God." The more we contemplate God, the more we become aware of God's intentional condescension to us! And God says, "you also ought to wash one another's feet". This *God who Is Unity* reminds us that we are made with that same tendency towards cooperation and community. And so, journeying into God reminds us of our neighbour and urges out outwards. "All disciples were *and still are* sent". We crave God's peace, yet we would also *be a channel of* that peace. Our embrace with God is the "ground of our meeting" with others, and cannot be distinguished from our intercession for others. "O Thou who camest from above... kindle a flame of love... stir up Thy gift in me... My acts of faith and love repeat". No quick fixes. No speeding past the troubles of the world. Rather, a slow journey into God and taking time to notice the pains of the world, attending to the worlds' Gethsemanes and Calvaries. Again, God's "holy invitation to grieve and weep."

One man who looked out for younger Aboriginal men was a painter. He was in punishment because he was wearing the blame for something he hadn't done. Everyone knew someone else was guilty, but there's a code of behaviour about these things. He wasn't allowed to paint while on restriction. And already his period of restriction had lasted five times longer than the usual practice that I'd observed. And not being able to paint was a real burden. "But it is what it is..." he would say. Like a mantra, telling himself not to overreact, not to make things worse, to wear his tough punishment. Silent before his accusers and silent before the system. Like our

Saviour.

I had previously seen his art. You walk past much of it on the way to the room where chapel is held. Pictures of sky and animals and stones. I recall Rilke's words: "one moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a *star*." I pray that life is becoming a star for this man.

Journal entry

"God is at work in the midst of suffering... bearing the pain." Seen so clearly in the incarnation: "God there in the manger cried and moaned... in God, man's weeping"; this man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. "Come, sinners, see your Maker die/ and say, was ever grief like His?" "In Jesus on the cross... God embraces our pain." His "cry of abandonment... a *real abandonment* that reaches into the heart of the Trinity". "What helps [us] is a God who is with us, who feels with us, out of divine compassionate love," identifying "with the suffering of the world in the cross of Christ". Even our *undeserved* suffering. "The silence of Jesus on the cross... reveals God's solidarity with the sufferer, not in unrealistic platitudes or false expectations."

This suffering in solidarity would be my path: "O living flame of love that tenderly *wounds my soul*". "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Paul confesses: "I bear on my body the brandmarks of Jesus." "The stigmata of Jesus, in the spirit if not in the body, remain [the] mark of authentication for every Christian disciple". Somehow "God's power is revealed *in the midst of* suffering and evil, not as triumphalist conquering power" but *hopeful solidarity!* And "if the energy of evil is to be... transformed..., someone must suffer its impact." So I "bear manfully the cross of [my] Lord", woven like threads into my diaconal calling, mourning with others who mourn. An intertwining "lament... express[ing] rage to God for the injustices that constantly befall us but help[ing] us *at the same time to hold onto* the compassion of God in the midst of human suffering."

Serving as prison chaplain changed me. Spending time with indigenous men in prison humbled me. Their stories, along with stories from the other men I encountered, and also the stories in my subsequent placement continue to instruct me. They teach me something of a God who does not leave us without a witness. A God whose love reaches so deep that even when we are in the depths, it is God we find there! And a God who calls unlikely people like me to be a signpost back to *Him*. Because if I, with all my inherent weakness and failings, and with my own story rattling around, can nevertheless see and hear their stories, *how much more* will God – *who is love* – see and hear and know?

Appendix and additional resources by UCA Deacons

Doctoral Thesis by Rev Dr Tracy Spencer: *White Lives in a Black Community: The lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha community* 2011

Doctoral thesis by Rev Dr Michelle Cook: *'Being a Covenanting and Multicultural Church? Explorations of Ecclesiology in the Uniting Church in Australia'* (2020)

Doctoral thesis by Rev Dr Alison McRae, *De-Centred Ministry: A Diaconal View of Mission and Church* https://repository.divinity.edu.au/4/1/Alison_McRae_Thesis._copy_1_.pdf

Yarta Wandatha, a book by Rev Denise Champion and Rosemary Dewerse