

RECONCILIATION WITH GOD AND WITH EACH OTHER
THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY WITH INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

*1998 Mission Australia Address by Dr
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It is both a privilege and an embarrassment to be here today and to be presenting BCA's Annual Address on the subject of ministry with indigenous people. It is a privilege because I value this opportunity to be publicly associated with BCA, an organisation which has, rather quietly and unobtrusively, contributed greatly to the Church's ministry to Australians in remote and difficult places. It is an embarrassment because once again I am risking being seen as an expert on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people think. I tread a very fine line which, if I step over it, places me in the camp of those who have for the past two hundred years told Aboriginal people how they should act.

I am thankful for the graciousness of those Aboriginal people, some of whom are here today, who have to listen to me time and again and then get up and respond. However, Aboriginal and Islander Christian people want us to care about them and their aspirations and I think they know that I care and that they forgive me my mistakes. First and foremost I am a Christian, not a black or white person, and as a Christian, it is my responsibility through prayer, through listening to people and through study to develop an informed Christian mind on the issues that face the Church. I am also an Anglican and so it is my responsibility to think particularly about my own faith community and how it lives out the gospel in Australia today.

So today I want to share with you some thoughts on our Church's ministry with indigenous people, but particularly with Aboriginal people. A person has only one life, and I have not had the privilege and blessing of spending as much time with Torres Strait Island Christians as I have with Aboriginal Christians. I want to place what I say in the context of reconciliation. This is not because it is trendy or politically correct to have the right buzz-word, but because when a Christian talks about reconciliation, they are unavoidably talking about the Gospel.

Reconciliation - being lost and being found

Reconciliation is one of those less-used, higher-level words which suddenly bursts into popularity when somebody somewhere associates it with something important, something the public is interested in and, these days, something the media latch onto. Words like this, which once hardly anyone knew and now almost everyone uses, are extremely important. They label goals and aspirations which are otherwise complex and difficult to explain. Catch-cries like 'sustainable development', 'just society' and 'job security' matter to us because they allow us to speak of the hopes that lie at the heart of our dreams: dreams of what life could be like not only for ourselves but for our children's children.

Sometimes these words seem to label impossible dreams. I used to know what glasnost and perestroika meant but now I have forgotten. The revolution demolished the USSR before its huge inertia could be overcome. Like 'peace in our time' these phrases have been overtaken by history. Yet at other times these phrases label deep desires which should always remain the very essence of our being. Such hopes should not be allowed to die. True, the revolution may sometimes seem to have failed. As Abba sang

We never thought that we could lose
There's no regrets
If I had to do the same again
I would my friend, Fernando
There was something in the air that night
The stars so bright, Fernando.
They were shining there for you and me
And Liberty, Fernando.

But if the cause is worth dying for or, more importantly, worth living for the revolution will not die. Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité, for example, were words worth living for. That nowhere in the world have they yet been achieved does not mean that they should be set aside, relegated to the museum of lost causes. Some dreams matter so much that they never totally fade. They may re-emerge in different forms, but in every generation those who care will always take them up again.

Reconciliation is a word like that. It labels something too important to die. And, because of the sudden currency of the word, everyone cannot help knowing that I refer particularly today to reconciliation between black and white Australians. Frightened politicians may want the reconciliation process to die a quiet death, or perhaps hope it might be choked by bureaucracy. Hurt and desperate Aboriginal and Islander people may act in haste and propel it down the path to suicide. If we do not achieve reconciliation in our lifetime, it will be a failure of our generation, a failure which history will record. But if we fail our descendants, they will take up the reconciliation cause wherever we left off, for some causes do not die.

As an English word, reconciliation was primarily a religious, a Christian word. Verses like 2 Corinthians 5:19, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' implanted in the Christian mind the feeling that the word reconciliation, better than any other word, labelled the new relationship with God, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. So although we can speak of reconciliation as something which happens when divided people come together or even when inner conflicts are resolved, a primary focus of the word as it has come down to us within the Christian community is what happens between us and our God. Jesus often described this in terms of being lost and found — the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. To be lost is to be alienated from God. To be found is to be reconciled to God.

How many of our generation are lost? How many of us know only where we have been, but not where we are going? Most of us here are within about 10 years of my age. We are the generation of the second half of the twentieth century. When I was a teenager, Sputnik was new in the sky and on a cold and starry night you could see it. In affluent white Australia, young people my age believed that a new world order was imminent, made possible by science and technology which would not only open up space for exploration but would cure disease and banish hunger.

But the world at this end of our lives, as the millennium closes, is not the world we dreamed. Space science has taken a few human beings to the edge of our solar system but too many children are still abused in our homes and institutions. Global communication has increased beyond our wildest dreams but there have been more wars in this half century than at any other time in recorded history. Genetic engineering has revolutionised food production but thousands die of hunger every day. Australia has one of the highest

standards of living in the world but also the world's highest rate of suicide. We can connect to people of every nation in the world via internet but racism still infects our schools, our streets and our communities.

There is a very real sense in which our generation has lost its way. All the 'isms' have failed us, from Marxism to Capitalism to Secular Humanism. The world's greatest institutions and the world's most enduring ideas seem to have lost meaning. The generation born to us do not believe in the future and resist committing themselves to anything more distant than Saturday. Philosophers label this 'post-modernism, but that is just another 'ism' which is dead already, for 'post-modernism' is a euphemism, not just for believing that there is no way, but for failing to find it.

These kinds of things are the marks of what the Scriptures call lostness — 'all we like sheep have gone astray'. Some kinds of lostness, like the lostness of the sheep, creep up on us. We go our own way. Attracted by elusive greener grass we lose sight of the path. We rationalise, closing our ears to the voice which calls us back. Other kinds of lostness are more obviously our own choice. Like the lost son, we try to escape to distant emotional countries, far from our true home. We squander our spiritual and emotional and psychological resources in short-lived experiences, and end up with nothing.

But the story of the prodigal son teaches us that it is we who left our spiritual home and not the other way round. Our true home is with God, in this life and in the life to come. Like Australia in Peter Allen's song, no matter how far afield we roam we can still know where home is. But we must make the decision to turn and face home again. That reorientation of ourselves is what repentance is. And, like the prodigal son, we will find as soon as we turn back, that our Father God has already met us on the way. We find that our carefully prepared speeches, our analysis of where we went wrong and what we intend to do, are empty. For we find that the reconciliation God offers is a free gift, and that if we accept it, God will take us home.

That gift, of course, was made possible through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. That is why St Paul can say

The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

It is, therefore, why Paul could also say

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

Everything old has passed away.

Everything has become new.

All this is from God who reconciled himself to us through Christ.

For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. (2 Cor 5:17-19)

The only path to true personhood in this life and to eternal life beyond death is through reconciliation with God, by faith in Jesus Christ. Yet it is a sobering truth that Jesus told us that that road is the less-travelled road, that the gate to it is narrow, and the path is not easy. But it leads to all there is that is worth attaining.

Yet it is crucially important that the way to God is described both as gate and path. We do not simply pass through a gate, achieve a changed state and enter nirvana. When we enter the gate we find ourselves on a path. It is not an accident that before the nickname 'Christians' stuck, the first believers called themselves the people of the Way.

One of the wonderful mysteries, one of the beautiful paradoxes of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God is that it is both present and future. What that means to those of us who have become reconciled to God, and who are on 'the way', is that our lives must show to the world, in this life, some of the characteristics of the life to come. There are many such characteristics including the list called the fruits of the spirit such as love, joy and peace. But especially today I want to pause and remind us how being reconciled to God demands that we strive for reconciliation with others.

If the old story of Cain and Abel teaches us anything, it is that division is as old as the human race itself, and that unreconciled differences can lead to bloodshed. Racism infected the ancient world no less than it infects the late 20th century world. One of the biggest challenges facing the early Christian church was how to resolve the tensions caused by importing old prejudices into the new community. Paul made it absolutely clear that the old division of race, class and gender had absolutely no place in the community of people on the way. That is why Paul could proclaim

There is no longer Jew or Greek.

There is no longer slave or free.

There is no longer male or female.

For all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

And lest anyone think that only the dominant ethnic groups in the church were included, Paul later expanded part of this text.

In that reconciliation, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all in all. (Col 3:11)

Jesus told us that loving God and loving our neighbour were very similar things, and he specifically told us this in a cross-cultural context and an interaction between strangers.

Yet it seems that love for our fellow human beings is not always evident even among those who name the name of Jesus and call themselves the people of God. One of the saddest observations from any reading of 2000 years of church history is that the principle, which Paul so strongly stated, of absolute equality between people of all races, classes and genders has rarely been evident in the life of God's people. Reconciliation with our fellow human beings calls for genuine desire and effort on our part, and for much of Christian history this desire and effort have rarely been fully in evidence.

It is very sobering, almost frightening, what this says about the Church. For St John declared love within the Church to be the very proof of our salvation.

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That is the attitude we must demonstrate to the world, both in word and in deed. That is the goal which our Christian faith community must always be seeking, and when we have strayed from it, it is the life to which we must return. That is what reconciliation is.

Reconciliation between Aboriginal and recent Australians

The history of Christian missions to Aboriginal Australia is a good case of the church's uncertain witness to the equality of all people in the sight of God. Christian missionaries certainly wanted to tell Aboriginal people about Jesus. They wanted Aboriginal people to know that long ago in another culture far away the Son of God had died that they might be reconciled to God. For this firm conviction they deserve our respect and the gratitude

of all those Aboriginal people who have come to know the Jesus whom so many of the missionaries genuinely loved and tried to serve.

Christian missionaries never stooped to the depths of brutality and violence which drove those who killed Aboriginal people to dismiss them as worthless and sub-human. To the missionaries they were human and deserved God's grace as much as anyone else. But the missionaries were people of their time, people who grew up believing in the implicit superiority of what they called 'European civilisation'. They believed theirs to be 'Christian civilisation' and they saw their role as changing Aboriginal society and culture to resemble their own. Thus they assumed roles which were dominant rather than equal, powerful rather than serving, even arrogant rather than humble.

Until very recently, then, the church did not visibly demonstrate that all people were equal. For so very long, not even Christian Aboriginal people were shown that they were equal, and in many ways they still are not. While ever this travesty remains, there is within us a denial of the gospel, a failure to show the world that in Christ there is no race, class or gender.

Prominent in our news at the moment is the 'Stolen Generation' and the Prime Minister's timid but calculated refusal to apologise for what happened, as if you only apologised for things which have no price tag, as if apologies were only given if all that was required were words devoid of actions.

Few missionaries actually personally removed any children from anywhere. A very small number did, but most of those Aboriginal children who were removed from their parents were taken by police, welfare officers and so on. Christian organisations and therefore some Christian people were mostly involved in receiving the children, and were party to the cover-up by which Aboriginal children's ancestry was, where possible, hidden from them.

My main sadness about the church, about Christian Australia, is that most Christians so unquestioningly accepted the system. That Aboriginal society and culture was inferior was simply accepted. That indigenous people's future, if any, was absorption into white Australian society was not something which the churches publicly questioned until well into our lifetime. Aboriginal and Islander people were not only second-class citizens: in the churches they were second-class Christians whose path to Christian maturity lay only through adopting European ways.

This sinister doctrine that Aboriginal people are somehow inherently inferior has not yet disappeared. In recent years Aboriginal inferiority has been publicly named by such prominent Australians as Richard Holmes à Court, Marshal Perron, Hugh Morgan, Tim Fischer and, recently, Senator Ross Lightfoot.

I call this a sinister doctrine because it is not just an anthropological misconception, not just a wrong idea. It is a carefully-nurtured doctrine, for it and it alone could justify the dispossession of Australia's indigenous people. It cannot be claimed that Australia was ever terra nullius in the totally unoccupied sense. But it can be cunningly alleged that Aboriginal and Islander people were inferior, that they had no concept of ownership and therefore no right to own, that they understood neither possession nor dispossession and therefore could enter into no treaty.

The belief that indigenous people are inferior, rather than merely different, runs counter to the clear Christian doctrine of racial and social equality. And this is something which we in the church really can do something about. What needs to be done by the Australian

community as a whole to redress the injustices of the past will cause endless debate in the Australian community and even Aboriginal and Islander people will disagree. But the church can at least change its own ways.

The church is the people on the way. The church consists of all those people who have entered the gate and become reconciled with God. The people on the way, the Christian community, must demonstrate reconciliation to the world. Not to do so is to diminish the free gift of reconciliation God offers to us all, whatever our race or culture.

Jesus spoke to this issue exactly in the parable of the man forgiven his huge debt who in turn, refused to forgive the smaller debt owed to him by someone else. Those who have been reconciled to God must themselves become reconcilers. I have been speaking primarily of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians but the churches' ministry of reconciliation, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, is both to those who are near and those who are far off. Here, had we time, we could name races other than indigenous Australians, we could name the hearing and visually impaired, the AIDS sufferers, the homosexuals. We could name all with whom our estrangement is obvious, all to whom our actions belie our words, all to whom we say 'Jesus loves you' but ignore their plight or merely dissociate ourselves from their company.

WITNESSING TO OUR UNITY IN CHRIST

As St John clearly tells us, our salvation itself, our claim to the free gift of eternal life, is shown to the world by our unity. Our church has failed frequently to demonstrate love within its ranks, and nowhere has this been more so than in its failure to witness to the equality which transcends accidents of birth such as race. If the church is to demonstrate this unity, as proof of the genuineness of its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church must do this at every level. In some ways, the highest levels are the most important so I will begin there.

Unity at the Level of Church Structure.

The structures and hierarchies of the Anglican Church or, as we used to call it, the Church of England in Australia, derive from the Church of England as it has traditionally been organised in England itself.

When the Church of England first extended its presence beyond the British Isles, the prime motivation was to provide for the needs of English people abroad. The first Anglican overseas societies, SPCK and SPG, were formed initially to cater for English colonists. However, as the Preface to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer shows, even in the colonies people of other races and ethnic origins soon began to join the Church. In response to this, these societies evolved into missionary societies in the fuller sense of the word, seeking also to evangelise people of other faiths and cultural backgrounds. In due course, societies like CMS were created to engage exclusively in what were then called 'foreign missions'. As the Church of England presence grew throughout the world, the nature of the church on non-English soil was vigorously debated. Great English missionary thinkers like John Venn promoted the concept of the indigenous church, self-governing, self-supporting and self-perpetuating.

However, as the 19th century debate progressed, a distinction began to develop between the indigenous church and the colonial church. Missionary thinkers began somewhat reluctantly to accept the reality that a truly indigenous Anglican church was only feasible in places which were not British colonies, or, if they were, were likely to have very small English populations. It was logical, with a country like, say, 19th century China, to

imagine the Church of England missionary presence eventually moving towards the establishment of local dioceses with local clergy and local bishops with reduced emphasis on the Church's 'Englishness', with considerable independence and with modified structures which enabled the local - that is, indigenous - people to govern the church. On the other hand, the Church of England in British colonies with larger expatriate English populations, like New Zealand, Australia or Canada, was thought to have a different kind of future. While attaining some degree of independence of Canterbury, such dioceses would be governed by colonial bishops and no structures would be put in place to guarantee indigenous bishops, or even indigenous representation on decision-making bodies.

The Anglican church in the world today is much like the 19th century policy-makers thought it would be, although not necessarily in the same places – China is an obvious example. The indigenous church which the 19th century thinkers envisaged did not emerge in their lifetime, but it has now become much more of a reality with the breaking up of the Empire. All over the world, in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, the departure of the colonial governors is being followed in due course by the departure of the colonial bishops. In the vast majority of cases, these bishops gladly hand over the care of the church to indigenous bishops and to their local synods. As Article 34 of the 39 Articles allows and encourages, the Anglican church in many of these places has begun to develop its own ways of being Anglican. Yet it would also be true to say that the great Anglican traditions are at their strongest in some of these places, whether it be Anglo-Catholicism in Melanesia or Evangelicalism in East Africa.

On the other hand, the old colonial church has survived in places like Canada and Australia, with what in reality are only a few minor cosmetic changes. It has survived for one reason, and one reason alone, which is that the indigenous people are far outnumbered by the white settlers or, to put it another way, indigenous Anglicans are far outnumbered by non-indigenous Anglicans.

One of the deep underlying problems which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face is the limits which their minority status creates. Any political, social or communal ambitions they may have are restricted to the degree of freedom the majority expatriate community allows them. 'Self-determination' is only self-determination up to a point, circumscribed by all sorts of boundaries. All around them, nations which once were colonies like Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, are independent nations managing their own affairs. Of course these nations have their problems, but they are problems of their own creation and the solutions are in their own hands. They have control over their own futures, and the same liberty we in Australia have to handle the future wisely or foolishly.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can never aspire to this. It is not a dignity which they will ever fully gain. They will always be the colonised. In this way they differ from all other Australian ethnic minorities, most of whom are here by choice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will forever be those who were here first but have had to accept structures of all kinds imposed on them from outside. The question we must face to is to what extent the Anglican Church of Australia is still basically an imposed colonial edifice, still the Church of England in Australia, and to what extent its structures should be changed.

I am old enough to remember the discussion around the dinner table about whether

Archbishop Mowll should be the last English Archbishop of Sydney. When Archbishop Gough departed, I recall that the discussion became somewhat more heated. If white Australians can understand the feelings of Anglicans that an Australian-born Archbishop might somehow symbolise our coming-of-age, our Australianness rather than our Englishness, our local identity, how much more must indigenous people feel that recognition of their potential to occupy leadership positions in the Church would also be a symbol of their equality and identity as Aboriginal and Islander Australians.

Through the efforts of sincere missionaries, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have become Christians. In many parts of Australia, they have become part of the Anglican Church, in some places with a loyalty which extends over several generations. Yet they have always had to accept their position in a structure which was transported from elsewhere and imposed upon them. Some may argue that this applies to all Anglicans. The crucial issue, however, is the message which the church's structures gives to indigenous Australians, and the message these same traditional structures give to those outside the Church.

Indigenous Australians live in world where others have come and taken over. A minority in their own land, they are daily required to accept the consequences of minority status. The main consequence has always been that they have rarely had a voice in their own affairs, whether it be taking of their children, the use of their land, or even which public facilities they could enter.

Equally, they have been denied a voice in the decision-making bodies of the Anglican Church of Australia. I refer particularly to the Church's major decision-making bodies, the Diocesan Synods. Now it could be argued that Synod members are democratically elected, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have as much right to be elected as anyone else. This is true, but is it just? Democracy can also be called majority rule. Democracy does not well serve the needs of a minority, no matter how much justice is on their side. An unfortunate but inevitable reality is that unless steps are taken to ensure minority representation, it will not necessarily happen.

What the church is saying to indigenous people is, "Here we are. We are the church. We have arrived in your land. We are glad that you want to join us. But don't expect us to change anything. We white Christians are the majority and our system is that the majority rules. We are not racist but we outnumber you. If you go along with this you are welcome to belong and we will call you Anglicans!".

The result, of course, of this is that, outside the few dioceses where there are indigenous parishes with indigenous churches, an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander is only very occasionally elected to a Synod. They are only ever members by chance and a temporary one at that. It can be argued that this is only fair and that other racial minorities cannot guarantee themselves a voice in Synod either. It is true that they have no such guarantee, but it is also true that other groups have largely come to Australia by their own volition, and joined the Anglican Church by choice. The indigenous response to the statement that they too may, by chance, be elected to Synod like anyone else, is inevitably the realisation that even the Church is yet another structure which has been imposed from outside. It is yet another organisation where the colonial majority rule and where unchanged traditions, in this case in the form of the geographical diocese, keep indigenous people invisible.

And here we come to a rather different point, which is not just that the indigenous

members of our church lack a guaranteed voice on our highest decision-making bodies, but also that by their absence we declare to the world that this does not matter to us. We declare that our traditional way of doing things is more important than our witness to the rest of Australia. We leave to chance our opportunity to say to all Australians that we Anglicans care enough about the people to whose country this Church has come, to ensure that their voice is always heard when our representatives meet to discuss the life and work and future of our Church.

Throughout Australia's recent black and white history, Aboriginal and Islander people have frequently been accorded on-paper rights which were never translated into reality. On paper they have the same rights as anyone else to be on Synods. But this will mean that they rarely will be, and that it will be left to the remote Dioceses with large indigenous populations to have some indigenous representation. What we have to decide is whether this is good enough, and whether this projects the image we want to project. Or should I say, projects the image of the Kingdom of God.

In 1988, the Primate publicly apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for the suffering which white settlement had brought. Among other things, Archbishop Grindrod said,

'We want to walk together with you, sharing and learning together, accepting and respecting each other. Help us to listen to you. Help us to learn from you.'

This is too important a matter to be left to chance. We can be reconciled on paper but how do we demonstrate reconciliation to a watching world? How do we apply the Archbishop's words to the Church's decision-making bodies? Phrases like 'walk together', 'learning together', 'respecting each other' are meaningless if they are never more than a high-sounding speech ten years ago this year. Should we leave their fulfilment to chance? Perhaps holding tightly to some of our precious traditions is less important than setting them aside to demonstrate to the world that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of our decision-making processes at the highest levels.

In several parts of Australia today there is evidence of indigenous Anglicans being upset by decisions which affect them being made by bodies which they feel did not properly represent them. In Australia today there is increasing talk of independent indigenous churches. It is simply not enough to tell indigenous Anglicans that a few of them might get to Synod every now and then if circumstances happen to allow it.

Other Australian Christian churches have modified their structures to guarantee indigenous people are always represented on their decision-making bodies. The Anglican Church in other parts of the world, such as New Zealand, has found ways to change its structure to recognise and incorporate indigenous minorities in a permanent way. It is important if we are to really be the Anglican Church of Australia, and not just the Church of England in Australia, that we do the same.

Fortunately, I am only just now able to add that a fine example has been set by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. Earlier this year, the General Synod voted to amend its constitution and change its traditional structure to ensure that indigenous people would always be represented on that Synod as of right, not just by invitation or chance. This is a major step forward. Of course, one of the curiosities of our Anglican Church is that power finally rests, not with the Primate and General Synod, but with the Diocesan Bishops and Synods. It is there, in those bodies, some of which value their traditions a little too highly, that changes need to be made to demonstrate clearly

and unambiguously that we are more like the indigenous church than the colonial church, that we are part of this land and have taken root in this soil.

These Diocesan Synods are now asked by General Synod to do two things. Firstly, they are asked to ratify General Synod's constitutional amendments. 'As of Right' indigenous representation on Synod is a constitutional change which requires a majority of dioceses to ratify it or the amendment will not come into effect. Secondly, General Synod asks Diocesan Synods to enact similar legislation of their own, to enable 'As of Right' membership of each Diocesan Synod. What seems to stand in the way of this is the reluctance on the part of some people to change what they feel is our Anglican nature and tradition. But it is not the rules about Synod that define for ourselves, or declare to the world, what our Anglican tradition is.

Other things make us what we are. What makes us Anglican firstly, is that we have a strong belief in the authority of the Bible as the word of God, containing all that we need to know to be accepted by God. Secondly, we have a love of liturgy, which does not mean ritual so much as it means congregational participation. Thirdly, we respect what used to be called 'human reason', which in 1998 means that we believe in applying our minds as well as our traditions to the solution of those questions which face us. Fourthly, we feel that the best structure for the church is episcopal, which does not mean that we think bishops are infallible, but that we believe that the most biblical kind of leadership is that godly people should be set apart for this role. I, for one, do not want to see any of these things change. But I do long to see my church become truly Australian, witnessing to a gospel in a way which shows it is relevant to all Australians.

The church, by its very nature, must engage in mission, but one of the chief dangers of mission is to give the message that the gospel is something imported, and that the church is imposed from outside. We declare sometimes unwittingly, that the gospel is somehow more at home in England's green and pleasant land than in this the sunburnt country. While ever indigenous Australians feel alienated or excluded or even just unnoticed, we declare to them that where we have come from matters more than where we are. And while ever our structures do not guarantee them a voice, our right and credibility to critique unjust structures in other parts of Australian society are sadly diminished.

Unity at the Individual Level

Another word for what I have called 'Unity at the Individual Level' is simply friendship. The only friendship which is a real friendship is genuine friendship – and this is not something we can legislate. We can amend the Constitution of Synod to ensure indigenous membership, we can train and appoint Aboriginal clergy, but friendship comes from the heart. Of course not every white person can have a close friendship with an Aboriginal or Islander person. Not even every white Christian can have a close friendship with an Aboriginal or Islander Christian. Friendship cannot be contrived or engineered and, in any case, there are not enough indigenous people to go around. In those country towns we have been thinking about, where the proportion of Aboriginal people is reasonably high, I would hope that some white Christians and some black Christians were good friends. But I don't think I am actually talking about close personal relationships. Rather I am talking about people's attitude to each other. In the streets of Moree or Oodnadatta or Mt Isa, a person can be friendly to members of the other group or not. People can interact in a friendly way or not. Christians are people who should be identifiable by their love for one another and for others, and in a small town it is pretty

soon evident who is genuinely friendly and who is not.

I am reminded of an elderly Aboriginal Christian woman at a CMS mission in North Australia. She had leprosy and her right hand was severely disfigured. 'I always know which missionaries were the real Christians', she said. 'They were the ones who were happy to shake hands with me'. Friendship, I suppose, is as small as that – or should I be saying 'as large as that'. It is to do with acceptance of each other, with love rather than with charity, with affection rather than tolerance.

I am one of the lucky ones. I have had the chance to be around Aboriginal people for a long time and in many different places. I have had opportunities to help them but this is not in itself enough. Many well-meaning people have helped Aboriginal people, but not all of those people have also been their friends. So I hope I have also, sometimes, been a friend.

I am always being phoned by all sorts of well-meaning people who want me to help them do something about Aboriginal people and their aspirations. 'I confess I don't actually know any Aboriginal people', they often say. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Many white Australians grew up in comfortable middle-class suburbs and never met any black Australians. What should they do?

The answer is not easy. Last year I attended a beautifully-arranged reconciliation service in a suburban church. The church was full. We said we were sorry for the past. We prayed prayers for forgiveness and hopefulness. We lit candles and took them down to the front and planted hundreds of them in large trays of earth. But there were no Aboriginal or Islander people there. And would it have been the right thing to have found one or two and organised for them to be there?

Around the same time, I was contacted by Zadok members in Sydney. They wanted to meet together and talk about reconciliation with Aboriginal people and wondered if I could speak and whether I could help them get some Aboriginal people to be there too. I suggested that they simply arrange for the event to happen at the Aboriginal church in Redfern. It happened there and it was a good occasion. I spoke and so did the Aboriginal leaders, Ray Welch and Ray Minniecon. People interacted and talked to each other. It was friendly. It was real people and good things came out of it for both groups.

But we can't all do that. If every Anglican congregation in Brisbane, or every Anglican person in Queensland, tried to go and meet their Aboriginal Christian sisters and brothers at Woolloongabba or Cherbourg, they would be swamped. It would be self-defeating. But this does not mean that nobody should do it. Some should and I hope more will, but it's no easier for Aboriginal people in Fortitude Valley to open themselves to us than it is for us to open ourselves to them, and if we all try to do it, it will not be genuine friendship. But there is something we can all do. When we really care about people, we find ways of helping them even when we cannot meet them. The most important thing we can do is to care enough about Aboriginal and Islander people to become personally knowledgeable about the issues which confront them and us and the Australian nation. I have not said much about the big national issues like land rights, the stolen generations and deaths in custody because I am talking about ministry and our church. But to say you care about indigenous people and not to take the trouble to become knowledgeable about them, and the key issues, is hypocrisy, because that is one thing they desperately need their Christian friends to do. We must form a Christian mind on the issues which face our community, and we must learn to distinguish truth from falsehood, and discern when the

media distort the issues.

The other thing we can all do is to support our Aboriginal and Islander Christian brothers and sisters by prayer and by giving and by actively lobbying our Synods. A lot of good things have happened but there is a long way to go yet. Our church needs us all, Islander, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We can all work to make our church a place where all of us equally find acceptance and fellowship and equality and friendship. This will show to the world a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Aboriginal people have described themselves as people of the dreaming. The focus of much of today's dreaming is on justice and equality. The dream of a future in which all people are truly equal is a dream which has been especially named in our own lifetime by people as widely separated as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Lech Walenza. It is a dream which none of us should lose.

In my present work in Bible translation in indigenous Australia, it no longer surprises me that the Book of Revelation, the book of Dreams, is so important to Aboriginal Christians. These days, after translating the Gospels and perhaps the creation epic of Genesis, and the giving of law in Exodus, it is Revelation which Aboriginal people want translated next.

It is after all a book of dreaming, and three of those dreams shine brightly for them in this vision beyond all visions. First there is the dream of the glorified Christ in Chapter 1: 1-12, calling on them to step out of their fears in the presence of the One who is the beginning and the end of all things. Then there is the dream of all nations, all cultures, all languages equal in the presence of God (7: 9-12). And finally there is the dream of the end of their ordeal, the end of pain, the end of grief, the end of tears. (7: 13-17; 21:1-4). These are dreams for all of humankind, dreams of all of our destinies, dreams God calls us all to share, calls us all to live for and, in the end, to die for.

Unity at the Level of Church Leadership

I have purposely separated out church leadership from church structure. Important as church structure is, it is not always particularly public. What the public sees are the church leaders. Bishops and clergy are more tangible and more visible than the Synods. It is here, in the evident racial composition of its leadership, that the colonial church has most visibly remained the colonial church. In Australia, all churches have been shamefully slow to ordain Aboriginal people. I have just returned from visiting a Bible translation project in an Anglican community in Vanuatu. All of the clergy of the Church of Melanesia, all priests and all bishops, are Vanuatuan. There were indigenous Vanuatuan clergy one hundred years ago, and the majority have been Vanuatuan for most of this century.

They were being ordained long before Aboriginal people were ordained. With the lone exception of James Noble, deaconed in 1925, there were no Aboriginal clergy until I was well into adulthood. Until about 20 years ago you could count all Anglican Aboriginal ordinations on one hand. It is thought-provoking to ponder why this is so – that is, why was the Anglican church happily ordaining Vanuatuan long before it was ordaining Aboriginal people? Why was the Anglican church in Melanesia building theological colleges, identifying promising young Vanuatuan Christians and training them for the ordained ministry so long before the Anglican church in Australia even thought about it? The answer is to do with the colonial church. There never were going to be many European residents of what was then the British/French condominium of the New

Hebrides. The Anglican church was spread over many small islands, most of which had no European residents at all. It was simply unrealistic to try to find, train, appoint and support white missionaries in every village. The only future was an indigenous future, in the hands of indigenous clergy and no-one seems to have doubted this or argued much about it. A curious fact is that this same attitude was adopted in the Torres Straits. Islanders were ordained and appointed very soon after the Anglican Church assumed responsibility from LMS.

In continental Australia, it was different. The large white population far outnumbered the black population. Aboriginal peoples' lives were regulated and controlled much more than the lives of the Vanuatuans. Aboriginal people were a dominated, subject people and this kind of attitude, consciously or unconsciously, was adopted by the church. They were seen as the objects of mission. The colonial church was in control. They were always measured by the yardstick of the white clergy. Even in the AIM/UAM context they only rose to be 'native helpers'. In the Anglican church it was expected that Aboriginal people could not be ordained unless they had completed high school, gone to seminary or theological college, gained their ThLs, done their time as assistants in a city parish and so on. In other words, insurmountable obstacles were placed in front of Aboriginal people which virtually guaranteed that none would be ordained until the 1970s or 1980s and only then because the rules changed so that the obstacles were removed.

Around that time the Anglican church began to rethink what Christian leadership was, to re-examine its models of ministry. It turned out that Aboriginal people could be ordained, after all, without having to jump through the white hoops. It turned out that demonstrating Christian leadership in the local Christian community, and having these gifts locally recognised, were more important qualifications than a BTh. St Paul would have been pleased.

I am prepared to state publicly my opinion that this was almost too late. There were many great Aboriginal Christian leaders like Barnabas Roberts and James Japanma who should have been ordained long ago. There were promising young people like CMS's 'Arnhem Land Seven' and others before them, who were insufficiently encouraged and trained. Had there been Aboriginal clergy fifty years ago in what used to be CMS and ABM missions, before mining, before grog, before the awful destruction of those communities, their future may have been different. Instead, the church waited to ordain Aboriginal clergy until they were going to have to minister in situations so complex, so demoralising and sometimes so antagonistic that their very survival would be threatened. I do not say this lightly. Despite the general high mortality and low life expectancy of Aboriginal people, the deaths of Aboriginal clergy and other prominent Aboriginal Christians in the north are at a level which defies explanation. Nevertheless, I am not pessimistic. In human terms, the Anglican church may have been too late but we serve a powerful God and he can turn disaster into triumph. He can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. One of the most important developments of recent years is Nungalinya College in Darwin. Initially an Anglican and Uniting Church initiative it now has Catholic support as well. BCA continues to be involved in funding Nungalinya staff, as do both CMS and ABM. Nungalinya is a crucial strategy. I think here in this meeting I can safely assume that I am speaking to Anglicans who care about sound biblical training for ministry, and I want to say to you that BCA and CMS should continue to support Nungalinya generously. This is not the time in Australia's Christian life to divide our support for

training Aboriginal leadership any further. We need to be willing to set aside denominational differences – what I have heard Aboriginal Christians call ‘white man’s fences’.

There is a growing hesitation in some evangelical quarters to continuing support of Nungalinga. This is because some people think that the courses are insufficiently biblical, or that liberation theology is taught, or that Catholic or Uniting Church theologies are suspect and so on. These are, in my view, small-minded and short-sighted objections. If we want students at Nungalinga to have a good biblical underpinning to their training, then we should continue to be in active partnership with Nungalinga. We should fund good biblical teachers and we should be glad, not only for Anglican students, but for the Catholic and Uniting Church students who will benefit from the same teaching. I have to say that I go to teach at Nungalinga College every year, and I have not met a member of the teaching staff who was not a deeply committed Christian, as well as a person convinced of the need to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evangelists, teachers and pastors.

Nungalinga was first envisaged as a college for traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people from the centre and the north. Nungalinga is now also making an important contribution to training Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders. Nungalinga has increasingly become a training institution for urban Aboriginal people as well. Here, I observe, they reaffirm their identity as Aboriginal people and that their confidence as mature and maturing Christian leaders is hugely enhanced.

BCA does not work in the big cities, but let me make a brief comment. It is in urban Australia that the Anglican church has been least successful in identifying and training Aboriginal leadership. There are, of course, some exceptions like Gloria Shipp and Ken Hampton, but many many more are needed. It is interesting that when mature Christian leaders have been sought for work in Anglican contexts, we have so often turned to the AEF. These AIM-trained people like Jack Braeside and Bill Bird have exercised an important ministry in several widely separated Anglican parishes. Wali Fejo, the present principal of Nungalinga, although now a Uniting Church minister, was previously with AIM. The Diocese of Sydney is to be commended for setting aside substantial funds for Aboriginal ministry, and I urge that this be used in significant amounts to identify, train and support Aboriginal clergy.

It is a very significant move that General Synod is acting to guarantee that there will always be an Aboriginal and a Torres Strait Island bishop. This was previously limited to the willingness of a bishop such as the Bishop of North Queensland to consecrate indigenous Assistant Bishops. But Assistant Bishops do not belong to the House of Bishops and do not have a right to be on General Synod. So moves to require that the national church has the responsibility to ensure that there are always indigenous bishops, and that they are on General Synod as of right, are very important indeed. This move sends a powerful message to all Australians, and not just Anglican Australians.

Unity at the Level of Congregation

While demonstrating unity at the higher, structural level is extremely important, as is evidence of unity in the racial mix of church leadership, the level at which unity is most publicly observable in the day-to-day sense is at the congregational level. The Anglican Church may be organised with the geographical diocese as its administrative unit, but what the average person sees is the local church. Perhaps they see no more than the

building they pass on the way to work, or the place where rites of passage are enacted like weddings and funerals. Perhaps they see a little more – Christian people visiting the sick in hospital or singing Christmas carols in the shopping mall. But the Christians in the town or suburb see their fellow worshippers. This, to them, is the visible church and it is among them the unity which is ours in Christ is demonstrated - or, sometimes sadly not demonstrated. The racial mix of the church in a racially-mixed community gives a clear message to its members, and a clear message to the wider community. This is no different, for example, than the way in which the class mix in a church gives a clear message about what socio-economic bracket of people worship there, about who belongs and about who is welcome.

I have said before, and I say again that indigenous issues are very complex, and that indigenous people, even Aboriginal and Islander Christians, are themselves divided on them. But we Christians have a privilege other Australians don't have. We have Christian Aboriginal and Islander brothers and sisters, and even if outside issues are very difficult, we have the marvellous opportunity to demonstrate our oneness in Christ within our churches. We should be able to model to the world what society should be like. I am the first to admit that this is easier said than done. A long history of racism and elitism and exclusiveness in the church in many parts of the world suggests strongly that the social and racial divisions of the community too often continue through the door of the church. One of the difficult truths we must face about the Anglican Church is that, in most of Australia, it has not always been a church which openly welcomed indigenous people and visibly incorporated them into its life and its activities. There are, of course, some obvious exceptions to this. In the Top End of the Northern Territory, generations of Aborigines in Arnhem Land have grown up on CMS missions which are now Anglican parishes. Those who are now Christians happily identify as Anglicans and comfortably attend Anglican churches even when they are away from their communities. The same is true of Aboriginal Christians from ABM missions and ex-missions in North Queensland, and, in particular, Yarrabah. And of course there is a long and faithful Anglican tradition in the Torres Straits.

In the rest of the Australia, the scene is rather different. There are very few places indeed where Aboriginal people are part of an Anglican family tradition. The old CMS mission at Wellington, NSW in the 1830s and 40s has left local Wiradjuri people with a perception that they are in a sense Anglican, but this has not necessarily meant that that church membership has been nurtured and encouraged in Wellington or elsewhere in central western NSW over the past 150 years. The CMS mission at Lake Tyers in Victoria has certainly left an enduring Anglican heritage among Aboriginal people at Lake Tyers. But this does not mean that Anglicans in nearby Bairnsdale or Sale or other parts of Gippsland have visibly demonstrated their unity with their Christian Aboriginal sisters and brothers. There was an Anglican church just outside Cherbourg, and children and young people were marched to it on Sundays, but this does not mean that Aboriginal people are a happy and visible part of Anglican churches in south-eastern Queensland. Outside these few locations, there has been very little outreach to Aboriginal people by Anglican Christians, and even in those places, it was often very long ago. The last Anglican mission in NSW, for example was John Brown Gribble's Warangesda mission, near what is now Darlington Point on the Murrumbidgee River in the 1880s. The truth is that there are very few places where Aboriginal people have generally felt welcome and

accepted in Anglican churches. In some places in the past they were actively discouraged - refused communion, for example, in northern NSW. Almost everywhere, if they were granted an Anglican burial, they were segregated in the cemeteries. There were, of course some commendable exceptions, but in most places they were ignored.

It must be said in passing that this was true of all the mainline churches, not just the Church of England. This left a gap which around the turn of the century was filled by the inter-denominational missions, notably the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) and the United Aborigines Mission (UAM). Both of these had a common origin in the little La Perouse Aborigines' Mission. One could well ask where the great Diocese of Sydney was in the 1890s and why the only outreach to Sydney's marginalised little Aboriginal community was the effort of a few young Christian Endeavourers from Woollahra Baptist and Petersham Congregational churches ?

The result of this was that those Aboriginal people in the settled parts of Australia who became Christians in the past century almost all heard the gospel from UAM and AIM missionaries. It is easy to criticise some of the attitudes and activities of these two missions, but it is sobering to remind ourselves that our Anglican church did very little. In 1971 Aboriginal people of UAM and AIM background, frustrated at the failure of the missions to acknowledge and encourage Aboriginal Christian leadership, formed the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship. Not at first intended to be an actual church, it very rapidly became a church. Virtually all Aboriginal churches in settled Australia are AEF churches, or have grown out of AEF churches. So it is typical of many Australian towns and cities that Aboriginal Christians worship at AEF churches, and not at Anglican churches which so long ignored and marginalised them.

In most of settled Australia, the Anglican Church has in fact been the church of the oppressors. It has been the established church, the religious presence at state occasions, the church most closely associated with the white settlers. Now I am not arguing that the Anglican Church has been the only church identified with the colonisers - the Presbyterian Church in Gippsland is another obvious example. But the Anglican Church has often been the worshipping community of the people whom Aboriginal people saw as those who were dispossessing them. And long after the dispossession and the violence, the Anglican Church remained respectable and socially elitist while the Aboriginal people were fringe dwellers in the shanties on the edge of town.

Changes are starting to happen, but there is still a very long journey ahead to reach the point where the unity and mutual love and respect of black and white Anglican Christians for each other is obvious to all. In the Diocese of Bathurst, a church in Dubbo has been given for Aboriginal people's use. One of the most important things about it is that it is under the leadership of an Aboriginal minister, and this gives the community, both Christian and non-Christian a very important message, if not exactly about where we now are, at least about the direction in which we want to go.

In the Diocese of Sydney, a church in Redfern has been given for Aboriginal ministry. This is a marvellous initiative, and there are several important factors at work here. Firstly, there was a struggling group of Aboriginal Christians in need of a place where their Christian lives could be focussed and nurtured in the midst of a damaged community where quietness and space for worship were hard to find. Secondly, there is a Rector who is supportive and involved but with the sensitivity not to want to take control. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the initiative is supported by the Diocese of

Sydney. Often what is needed is beyond the resources of the local Anglican parish, no matter how sympathetic they are. The issue of Aboriginal ministry is too important to be left to the often meagre resources of the local congregation. Support is needed from the wider Church community. The Diocese of Sydney has set a good example in setting aside a fixed proportion of its income for Aboriginal ministry. There are some recent initiatives here in Brisbane. Alex Gater has been ordained deacon and ministers in Holy Trinity parish, Woolloongabba, with an emphasis on Murri people gathering in cottage ministries. It is good that this ministry is supported by the Diocese of Brisbane.

It is, however, true that the most complex mix of black and white Australians is found in some of the smaller country towns. I know this concerns BCA because these are the kinds of places where a lot of its ministry has taken place. I will therefore give just a little more time to the church in this special context. In many of these places the division between indigenous and non-indigenous people is long and deeply ingrained into the life of the community. It must be said that these are difficult places to minister to both white and black Christians at the same time. The first person I have discovered in my research who publicly acknowledged this problem in writing was the Presbyterian missionary Charles Duguid, writing of Alice Springs in 1934:

The minister of the Methodist Inland Mission called for a talk with me and said, 'My heart often bleeds for the native people, but if I interfered on their behalf the cattle stations would be closed to me.' He felt he had to choose between ministering to two utterly different flocks – the white and the black.

This same dilemma faces many clergy in country towns today. 'If I show an interest in the Aborigines, I offend the whites and if I identify with the whites, particularly the powerful whites in this town, I am mistrusted by the Aborigines,' said a young minister in a Queensland country church.

Another minister in Bathurst, NSW, also spoke to me of the same dilemma. 'It is one thing to say that you support Aboriginal struggles. It is a very different feeling to be alongside them before the eyes of your neighbours in a small country town.'

An Anglican bishop of a country diocese recently told me, 'When I mentioned Aborigines in a sermon in one of my churches, one of the congregation said, as he left, that Aborigines were not human.'

I have recently had the privilege of walking a little way with an Anglican minister in an Australian country town by reading the journal of his first few years of ministry there. He has asked not to be named – not to protect himself, but so as not to betray the trust of those many people, Aboriginal and white, whose words he has recorded. I have changed their names and all identifiable places:

... Betty, an elderly Aboriginal woman, was apprenticed as a young woman for twelve years, no holidays for 2/6d per week. Two shillings was put into the bank ... The station was managed by a man called Smith ... Betty said the work was hard and constant ... Conditions were not good ... but they were bearable except when Mrs Smith had been drinking ...

... This country belongs to Tom. It's his home. His ancestors have roamed here for centuries. He told me that his great grandmother was the only Aboriginal to escape the massacre at River town last century. Hence there is some quality in Tom which makes him cautious of the white community ... he knows what they are capable of in moments of stress ... I have enormous respect for him ...

... Long discussion with Sid Lincoln . He is a member of the radical political section of the Aboriginal Land Rights ... I think a very dangerous man. He said to me that he hates all white people and if he had not liked me ... 'You buried my grandfather ... It was a lovely service ... If I didn't like you I would've picked you up and thrown you through Mum's window' ...

... Tom and I took notes from some of the old Bunlea Aboriginal reserve ration books. Later we visited Jane and I asked about the rations. She said, 'We hated having to ask for food ... Without having the Certificate of Exemption, we were nothing ... They were terrible days ... so humiliating.'

Betty and Tom and Sid and Jane are typical of the different kinds of Aboriginal people throughout settled Australia, hurt by their past, but also hurt by the present, struggling to know how to secure a decent future for their children and grandchildren. In their town there is an AEF church which some of them attend and which the Anglican minister respects.

Knowing Aboriginal mistrust of the mainline churches, the high point for this minister was when his Aboriginal friend, Tom Myers, became a member of his parish council: I have become fond of this race of people and I wouldn't do anything which would cut me off from their society ... I have been accepted into a remarkable position of trust within the Aboriginal Christian community. I feel I can visit members of the Aboriginal church and they know I would never try and taken any of their members away from their church ...

I happen to believe their church is vital to the Aboriginals of this community ... The fact remains that Aboriginal people do not trust the Anglican or Catholic churches because of past experiences. I have witnessed things which fill me with shame. This is not politics, it is the church – Christian racist attitudes within the major Christian churches ... My Aboriginal friend, Tom Myers, is a member of our Anglican Parish Council ... It has not been easy for him ...

In among all this, there are signs of hope. In this unnamed town, the Anglican minister, sensitive, compassionate, struggling with the implications of the gospel for his situation, is a sign of hope. His Aboriginal friend, 'Tom Myers', risking being hurt, is a sign of hope, not so much in what the Anglican church can do for him, but in what he can do for it, particularly if people have the grace not to be judgmental. The Aboriginal church in the same town is also a sign of hope, providing, for those who accept its fellowship, a place free of racial tension where faith can be nurtured. Even 'Sid Lincoln' is a sign of hope, as long as his anger does not destroy the very things he seeks, for his community needs people like him who do not accept their powerlessness and do not give up the struggle.

Towns like 'Rivertown' are the context where much of BCA's traditional ministry has taken place. I know that over the years many fine people have had ministries which have been effective, and that many BCA people are warmly remembered. But the very nature of this work, and the reality of the difficulty of finding suitable people, means that many ministries have been short-term. BCA personnel will normally be evangelical Anglicans , and this has some advantages, not the least of which is that they may be more sympathetic to the local Aboriginal Evangelical church, if there is one. But there is a lot more required than that. Acceptance in a country town takes time, and some clergy are never really accepted. The townspeople know where their heart is, and that is both the

white and black communities. The townspeople may like them and appreciate that they have some degree of ministry. But the townspeople will know where they really feel they belong.

I don't think that BCA has ever taken seriously the kind of training that a minister might need to work effectively in these contexts. Furthermore, I don't think the Anglican church has really taken seriously how to maintain effective long-term ministry in remote country towns. It is partly our hang-ups about the geographical diocese. Supporting clergy in remote and difficult places is usually left to the limited resources of the poorest dioceses. And of course today we see the tragedy of clergy departures following the railway closures and bank withdrawals in economically struggling rural communities. Of course one organisation which does try to do something about this is BCA because that is what BCA is about. But may I suggest that perhaps what BCA could be instrumental in doing in Australia today is helping the wider Anglican church in the serious thought that needs to be given to training, resourcing and supporting long-term ministry in these places.