

Manifesto

Uniting Church in Australia

Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress

1. Human worth

A complete race of people has almost been destroyed in Australia.

We, Aboriginal people, are the human beings, the race of people, who suffered from the policies and practice of genocide. Yet, despite this appalling waste of lives, in each human being there is worth money cannot buy.

People are precious to God. We are made in his image and he regards the salvation of a human being, in the depth of human reality or soul, as more valuable than any collection of things and gold. For God, all human people, including the Aboriginal people, are precious.

When a race is nearly destroyed what are the implications raised for those who seek to be obedient to God?

One Australian inheritance from the destruction of Aboriginal people is racism - the basic and fundamental denial of our human worth. Therefore the first requirement for action in the church must be to destroy the credibility of racism in Australian society. Honour and respect of the human worth of Aboriginal people is the essential mark of any move away from racism in Australia.

2. Resources and culture

A major consequence of the decimation of our culture has been the loss by all Australians of a vital link between resources and culture.

Aboriginal people of Australia use the land not only for economic gain, but for the living of all the people related to the land. Our culture enshrined land as the key focus for

human nurturing and development.

So behind the profound clash between our cultures there is a clash about the resources of the earth.

Aboriginal spirituality embraces a view of the sanctity of the earth: the land is not only for economic gain, but for living, nurturing and sustaining people. The vision of Psalm 8: "the earth is the Lord's", is closer to the Aboriginal than the western position.

3. Aboriginal unique rights

In denying that Aboriginal people are a unique people of the Australian land, who lived under the love and care of a loving God for millennia, Australians have ignored the unique rights of the Aboriginal people. Now we need to define and defend them!

To fail to acknowledge these unique God given rights is to accept that it is might alone which determines people's rights. The church can never put itself in the position of practising or defending a doctrine that 'might is right'!

The social interlocking of religious, social and legal aspects reveal a culture which has stood for thousands of years. Two hundred years of western occupation has destroyed this Aboriginal culture. This rapid destruction means that there is not the time to wait patiently for new recognitions and new policies to be adopted.

So we must proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ immediately because this is the loving revelation of God to us all. But God loving the world so much also means God hears the cry of affliction rising out of the processes of our cultural destruction, as surely as God heard the cry of affliction in Egypt.

4. Justice

Justice stands in the heart of God. Justice is not other than love. Love means really wanting the well-being of the other and working for that well-being by seeking to

understand and overcome the processes of this destruction and oppression.

God's love is expressed in our working for justice. God does not reconcile us to himself without deep change in us. Nor do the people who live in this country find reconciliation with each other without deep change in their regard of human worth, their concern for human destruction and their commitment to human justice.

5. Reconciliation

In the search to move towards each other - maybe towards some form of reconciliation - churches have constantly asked Aboriginal people to forget the past and to begin to build a new life together. The consequences of this failure to address real issues of justice has seen radical people outside the churches raising the banner for their suffering people. While they have been the ones who have suffered in any struggle, members of churches have welcomed and used the benefits achieved despite our harsh, unloving and unforgiving judgement upon them. Nothing can be more hypocritical! Christians can only accept this view by the suppression of the biblical view of God, of people and of the land.

6. The rapid destruction of Aboriginal culture

In the fourth chapter of Jeremiah his vision is of the awful rapidity of the destruction of Judah.

"Disaster falls hard upon disaster, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment." (Jeremiah 4:20)

Many of us have shared the sense of desolation Jeremiah foresees. "I looked on the earth, and lo it was waste and void, and the heavens, and they had no light." (Jeremiah 4:23)

For Aboriginal people Jeremiah's prediction has been horribly true. From Port Jackson in 1788 until and including the present time, the rapidness and thoroughness of our cultural destruction has continued unabated. The issues are not historical, but a present

experience of disintegration: our fruitful land a desert to us; our lives and relationships laid in ruins before our eyes.

7. The juggernaut

Few Australians appreciate how their society rolls over us like a juggernaut crushing our relationships and values and grinding us into the dirt. Fewer still appreciate that at this very moment that juggernaut is killing our people and destroying their culture. To us it is an experience akin to terrorism, and it is happening at this very moment in many, many Aboriginal communities such as Amata, Oombulgarri and Dareton.

The symptom is death: dying through alcohol, petrol sniffing, violence of many kinds, and illness - all diseases of cultural destruction.

8. False doctrines

As settlers expanded over the Australian land they justified their use of our land through two false doctrines:

- the first called terra nullius or 'nobody's land' denied our humanness and gave permission for our dispossession and massacre;
- the second, the doctrine of social darwinism justified these actions.

Now similar avarice and ingenuity is applied to the final acts of dispossession and death. Now in the name of economic development what we have and are as human beings is put at risk. Now the justification is the national interest. Our cost is not just loss of wealth and land; it is the incredibly rapid destruction of our culture, and with it our identity, the roots of our humanness.

Only those whose hearts have turned to stone can remain unmoved by this suffering.

9. Call to righteous anger

When Jesus meets the man with a withered hand and he is watched by those hoping

his loving action will enable them to accuse him "he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5). Hardness of heart turns the man and his pain into an object to be exploited - this grieves Jesus and he is angry.

The past and continuing chicanery experienced by our people reflects similar hardness of heart.

- Helpers wickedly used our dependence to enrich themselves with resources meant for our support;
- Wicked, powerful people manipulate the yield of our Aboriginal land into their own pockets. They suppress truth so we do not understand what is being done to us; they also suppress truth from the wider community to hide their deceit and wickedness. Such wicked suppression of truth angers God for in Jesus Christ he has made plain to everyone the nature of his righteousness (Romans 1:16-19).

We call the whole church to grieve with us in the hardness of heart surrounding us and rise together in righteous anger! Let us stretch out our hands to restore our broken country, even at the cost of the cross.

We ask the church to understand that there have been two sides to our missionary history.

On the one hand we give thanks to God for our missionaries because they brought us the good news. We were able to meet Jesus Christ, to know him as our saviour and to live in God's love. We will always be indebted to the whole church for the gospel.

However, the theology of our missionaries, clothed in their own cultural forms and their political and social interests, has imprisoned us in a narrow spiritual perspective, hostile to both the spiritual and social needs of our Aboriginal people.

Our own immensely strong evangelical tradition has encouraged Aboriginal Christians to remove themselves from the real socio-political life of our people, which we have

been taught to call 'worldly'. We call this part of life sinful. It leads us to hellfire!

We have been encouraged to believe social issues such as land rights, are spiritual, not political questions. Within this tradition we have been advised we will get our land rights in heaven.

So, instead of reaching towards the abundant life of the Kingdom, we have used our fiery enthusiasm for the evangelism of our people to offer them a narrow, conservative world. In doing so we have lost (or rather have never been given opportunity to discover) the truly radical nature of the good news of Jesus Christ as saviour. This has created a crisis of credibility among our people who are living in "the world" seeking to better the lives of our people.

It is a fundamental crisis of faith which arises because we have not yet faced the dilemma of being oppressed. Conversely, we must add, we face this dilemma precisely because our wider church brothers and sisters must still grapple with their own crisis as our oppressors.

We have often sought to address the problem of our difference by promising to humbly love one another and to seek reconciliation. We must all realise that humility is not submission, and that submission never leads to reconciliation. Neither is love something which stands alone as a good feeling generated towards one another. It always involves justice.

So love always expresses itself in righteous or God-like action towards one another.

We need to prepare for reconciliation realising it cannot be achieved simply by using the word as a slogan. It will only come when our humble, loving action together leads to real change.

There are three key areas we ask members of the Uniting Church to work through with us.

3. We must work out how christians see their vocation;
4. We must ask how do christians relate the material to the spiritual;
5. We must examine the ministry of reconciliation.

10. How christians think of vocation

Most of our people see their vocation as accepting to the truths of the gospel as their pastor or evangelist presents them, and then to lead an exemplary life free of moral fault. This is not the christian vocation. What Jesus did was radical and geared to changing the world.

Therefore, vocation of christians is to change the world, not to draw people out of the world. In fact, Jesus and his followers turned the world upside down by lifting up the poor and powerless. He was not content to change a few things, leaving the system intact.

We have been taught to support the conservative political and social systems as if they were of God. Jesus calls us to challenge all systems built by humans which keep people poor and powerless.

This is not only a message to be claimed by the poor. We plead with all our people in the Uniting Church to heed Jesus' great announcement that the Kingdom is at hand and to commit ourselves together to live the life of that Kingdom.

Our vision is of a just Kingdom in which the poor belong, those who mourn are comforted, the meek inherit the earth, those who hunger for righteousness are satisfied, the merciful obtain mercy, the pure in heart see God, the peacemakers are sons and daughters of God, and the persecuted for right and Godly action are honoured.

Our vocation is to share the Jesus announcement by showing people how the life and message of Jesus Christ offers new hope for a community of the blessed.

11. How do christians relate the material to the spiritual

Christians often tend to think of life as divided between the material and the spiritual, between the body and the soul. Yet this is not a biblical idea at all. This dualism totally distorts the ministry of Jesus and the nature of his saving grace.

When we limit ourselves to the spiritual part of life we ignore what dehumanises our people, what destroys our special quality of humanness, that we are made in the image of God.

We also see those who struggle with material issues as not being very spiritual, even as people who have fallen from grace!

Littlewise this spiritual gospel is partial - it allows our people to be pietistic and judgemental, even to join those who oppress, exploit and dehumanise our people and many other weak people in our society. And without any pangs of conscience!

It is a gospel in captivity and Jesus calls us to set his gospel free to be the good news it really is!

Aboriginal culture has never understood life in this divided way. All parts of life belong together - as they do in the Bible. Our people have always lived their spiritual lives in the political processes of our community life; white administration of government and church destroyed this unity and continue to maintain artificial divisions to our great and lasting disadvantage.

We call the church to rediscover the sounder roots of the Judeo-Christian tradition; to respond to God's promise in our biblical tradition of Kingdom of justice, peace and righteousness. Then we will be released from the bonds of this non-christian spiritualism.

We call on all christians of the Uniting Church, therefore, to witness to this Kingdom by what we can accomplish together in building a new respect and care for our common

life and community.

12. Ministry of reconciliation

We are all called to a ministry of reconciliation with God and with each other. In the Congress we have a strong sense of our duty to seek reconciliation of our people with God. It is always our highest priority.

As we commit ourselves to the evangelical task of seeking reconciliation with God, we must also pursue our reconciliation with one another in the Uniting Church and beyond. Even in the Uniting Church we are kept apart by our separate history on our side, two hundred years of continuing domination and deep racial prejudice.

In that two hundred years we have not really sought to resolve the conflicts between us, only to ease some of the pain they engender. We have not begun to lay the groundwork for conciliation with one another. We have done little to understand the dynamics of our separate ways of living. We have yet to analyse factors which fashion our relationships with one another so to know where to start talking with one another.

We have yet to enter into the experience of each others' existence so as to feel in any real way the changes reconciliation will certainly require.

On our part we have to say we see racism as sin. It undermines our human worth and treats us as if we were not made in the image of God. That is sin. Racism discriminates and suppresses so the potential of our lives cannot be fulfilled. That is sin! Racism dispossessed people of their land. That is sin!

We all know reconciliation happens through confession, repentance of sin and forgiveness. We must also accept that reconciliation must produce change; the change which comes only by facing the issues of injustice which stand unresolved between us. We need to know the justice we produce by our changed actions and behaviour brings peace between us.

The reconciling ministry of Jesus, sometimes characterised as the ministry of the suffering servant, wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5), should teach us that to reach that point of peace will involve much sacrifice and pain. So be it!

13. We invite your discussion

0. What are the key points of the Manifesto?
1. What do you feel about the Manifesto?
2. Prepare a list:
 1. of strong agreement with the Manifesto
 2. strong disagreement with the Manifesto
3. Can these be held together?

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