



National Council of  
**Churches in Australia**  
NATSIEC



## Restoring a Shalom

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As a Patron of the Decade to Overcome Violence, I would firstly like to express my gratitude for the gracious invitation to speak today at the 'Hearts are Burning' Forum. Indeed, from an Indigenous Christian perspective, it is an occasion to share and celebrate with you our journey thus far and the many challenges that lay ahead.

Before I talk on Indigenous Christianity and the challenges God has placed before us, I would like to reflect for a moment on our journey and approach, one that is rooted in Indigenous spirituality and one that offers contemporary Australia a rich gift.



Imagine if you will a plant in a pot whose roots have been constrained for years by the confines of that hard pot. Indigenous people have been that plant whose deep reaching roots have been constrained by the confines of a system. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress works to develop formulations and responses to break this symbolic pot so that Indigenous people can reach into their deep spirituality so that they can bear good fruit. Roots that reach to the core of Indigenous spirituality bear the marks of Peace, Order and good government. The system of Law. Assent. Culture. The word of God. Consistency, Values, Character formation, Beliefs. The fruits that bear from roots that are awakened and nourished in Indigenous spirituality include Justice, Community Development, Fellowship and Prosperity to name but a few. Indeed the fruit that bears from a nurturing of this spirituality are some of the richest gifts a nation could ask for. Gifts that contribute to a contemporary Australian society born from Indigenous soil and spirituality while retaining the unique identity of their creators.

This unique identity and reaching into our Indigenous spirituality is core in achieving things through our own processes and structures in line with the law which was



handed down to us by the creator when He formed this land. It is about restoring a Shalom, a magaya to this land and all of the people living in it.

We have all been witness to the passing of a truly great leader John Paul II, a leader that transcended the boundaries of religion, nations and prejudice. We have also been witness to an unprecedented era of violence perpetuated through terrorism, non more so evident than in war-torn Iraq. No doubt we are all aware of the graphic images of bloodied streets and carnage broadcast through the mass media. As the war continues, the issue of terrorism and violence will continue to play a central role in the stories we hear and see every day. This will probably be more evident in Australia now that Douglas Wood an Australian has been caught in Iraq by insurgents and held hostage. These images will no doubt have struck a nerve with Australians and the rest of the world as it hits closer to home.

But while violence perpetuated through terrorism is deplorable, I would draw your attention to the violence at home: violence you will rarely see on any media, nor a violence perpetuated through terrorism or civil acts of war but a violence of the spirit, body and mind; a violence perpetuated through poverty and broad-ranging misaligned Governmental policies that do not respond to the needs of Indigenous people.

It was once said by Mahatma Gandhi that poverty is the worst form of violence. I would like to add that poverty is also the worst form of terrorism. We as Indigenous Australians have unceremoniously experienced the worst form of terrorism for most of this century. I hardly need mention the vents of the first half of the century that shaped the unfortunate destiny for succeeding generations of Indigenous people. The latter half of the century, and the new, has seen little improvement in the emotional terrorism felt by Indigenous people.

Though well intentioned, Governmental responses have inadequately responded to Indigenous aspirations and it is at this juncture I would like to elaborate on the increasingly important role organisations like Congress are playing in providing pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



The world view of Indigenous Australians differs largely from the view held by the majority of mainstream Australia. Some confronting questions arise when considers that Indigenous Australians were not living in a spiritual Terra Nullius prior to European settlement. Indigenous spirituality played and will always play a central role in the lives of many Indigenous people. Yet it is a fact that Indigenous Australians are now unceremoniously living in conditions befitting of a third world nation. It is a fact that Indigenous Australians on all socio-economic indicators consistently rank below the national average. It is a fact that many Indigenous people remain affected by relatively recent experiences to which they were subjected because of their Aboriginality.

Australians who know the facts of the frontier may be unaware of what followed the defeat and dispossession of Aboriginal people over much of settled Australia. Survivors were subjected to government policies that attempted variously to displace, convert, isolate and eventually assimilate them. This, in combination with the fact that Indigenous people are more likely to experience disability and reduced quality of life due to ill health, and will die 20 years younger on average than non-Indigenous Australians, does not help the outlook.

Let us take an example. If expenditure on hospital care is excluded, less is spent per capita on Indigenous health than on the health of other Australians. However, Aboriginal people are admitted to hospital sicker, often with more than one illness, and they stay longer. Recent research has found that for every dollar spent on non-Indigenous Australians, about \$1.08 is spent on Indigenous Australians, yet we are three times as sick (ATSIC statistics). Socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians include higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of education and home ownership, health risk behaviours including higher rates of smoking and alcohol consumption and exposure to violence.

There are other factors attributed to loss of control and feelings of hopelessness that combine to influence this poor socio-economic outlook. In Queensland alone, approximately 72% of Indigenous households live in rented premises compared to 28% of all Queenslanders. Of those living in private dwellings: 2% do not have



running water connected; 2% do not have electricity or gas connected; 3% do not have a toilet; 4% do not have bathing facilities (source: Blue Care).

One hundred years on and Indigenous people still do not have an environment that quells the terrorism felt in their hearts and minds in their own land. One hundred years later, the life of Indigenous people is still sadly crippled by the subtle chains of discrimination and shackles of poverty. One hundred years on and Indigenous people still live on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. Indigenous people are still languishing in the corners of Australian society and still feel like exiles in their own land.

Let us not however be disheartened or wallow in the valley of despair but hopeful of a nation that embraces a conciliatory path toward the palace of justice and recognition for all Indigenous Australians. For

*The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations (Psalm 33:10-11)*

Our journey of Indigenous Christianity is one that is fuelled by an unwavering spirit for justice, understanding and a real desire to minister holistically with out people, a people willing to succeed and aspire given the right framework. Now more than ever we need to minister amongst our people. We need to continue to offer strength, guidance and hope.



The achievements of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress since its inception in 1985 in Townsville have spanned Indigenous generations across this nation. Within each State Congress has a presence that has permeated the social fabric of many Indigenous communities and families. Aside from holistic Ministry, Congress runs a range of progressive and culturally appropriate initiatives addressing Indigenous disadvantage where needed most. These range from a fully Indigenous boarding school, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, an elders retirement



village, a funeral service to fully accredited courses in Community Development and a Christian Ministry but to name a few. Just earlier today we officially opened the Yalga-binbi Training Unit and Diploma of Community Development. Who would have thought this possible 10 years ago on a barren piece of land full of wild scrub.

In Townsville alone, with our other initiatives such as Shalom Christian College, we collectively inject \$15 million into the local economy, and provide jobs and pathways for Indigenous people: positive change not expounded through popular rhetoric but through faith and solid accomplishment. I am sure there are other notable Indigenous achievements delivered through other organisations. God is indeed working in the lives of Indigenous people, but we also need to come together collectively as one and support those established pathways that are providing a better quality of life for our brothers and sisters.

Change to the lives of Indigenous peoples does not come quickly or easily, perhaps less so now with the present government policies of disbanding with nationally elected Indigenous bodies. Success in any Indigenous endeavour is usually undergirded by a system that enables personal and collective decision-making based on our unique cultural values and expressions. If Indigenous Australians are to realise fully their potential, it is imperative that a model of governance empowers their dreams, expectations and beliefs and not the obligations imposed upon them by the Government. Only a system of governance that engages Indigenous people to have a full and non-conditional voice in their destiny through choice will enable a full realization of their inherent strengths and God-given abilities. Anything less and Indigenous people will begrudgingly accept the conditions placed upon them whilst intrinsically feeling constricted in reaching for their own goals in the context and environment of their choosing.

The present policy of Indigenous governance through assimilation is narrow and leaves little room for full spiritual, personal and professional expression, and will not aid the socio-economic statistics of Indigenous people, whether that be in health, employment or house ownership as some examples. We increasingly need Government to recognise the historic and future context in which we aspire to succeed and then to respond accordingly. It is not prudent to accept the present



approach of mainstreaming services to Indigenous people, without first negotiating and implementing what Indigenous people say. Equality does not always mean identical treatment.

The way ahead lies in developing and empowering Indigenous decision-making processes and building on the existing strengths which Indigenous peoples, their institutions and their communities have to offer – and are ready to offer. Pathways through self-determination and a national voice will always feature in the dialogue of Indigenous Australians who continue to aspire to reach new heights. Our journey of Indigenous Christianity continues. It is intertwined with a need to minister holistically to provide the pathways that I have talked about and to ensure an overarching framework of government support enables Indigenous people to reach for their dreams. As the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress enters its 20th year, I am buoyant that God will present the opportunity for all of us to continue to develop and grow in Christ in our endeavour for prosperity, equality and justice for all Indigenous people.

*The Lord will guide you always, he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land. You will be like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58.11)* As Indigenous people continue to thirst for justice, let us be that spring whose water never fails them. Thank you.