



Land and Politics

Vicki Walker
NATSIEC 'Hearts are Burning' 2005



'What happened to all those people who walked the bridge walks? Did they just fall off the end?'

Vicki's main challenge was to the churches and others to address land rights, pointing especially to the furor caused by Pope John Paul II in 1986 when he spoke out on this very issue:

Let it not be said that the fair and equitable recognition of Aboriginal rights to land is discrimination.

To call for the acknowledgment of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination....

what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow. JP II 1986

'When we Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders gather', she said, 'what is the united cry that comes again and again? **Land Rights Now!**'

Vicki drew attention to the overlooked Petition presented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples to Pope John Paul II in 1986. This listed the shocking catalogue of problems faced by Indigenous people and called for urgent redress: 'we have the highest death rates, highest infant mortality rates, highest imprisonment rates...(therefore) on behalf of our ancestors and the children yet to be born, we expect you to heed our call for reconciliation and justice' (1986 Petition to John Paul II from the world's oldest living culture).



'What has changed?,' she said, 'if the Pope, or his successor, were here today, I could almost hand it over to him again without any alteration.'



Vicki pointed out that, whilst a major international campaign to relieve poor countries' debt had been taken up enthusiastically in Australia, nothing like the same attention was given to the crying needs of Indigenous Australians. Yet was not the biblical Year of Jubilee, proclaimed by churches for 2000, inextricably bound up with the return of

land and resources? Australian church leaders had made a 'Pilgrimage to the Heart' with young people in 2000, but then 'returned to their comfortable beds', with no real follow-up action to address the issues of Aboriginal people they met along their journey. A campaign for 'Returning the Land' (see badge and information left) was never given the support to take-off.

Some small parcels of land had been handed back by the churches to Indigenous people since 1986, but so very very little, and often with conditions or qualifications. Again and again the same issues were raised: to whom exactly should we return the land? What will they do with it? Etc. Thereby the will to just reparations was denied. Yet the challenge of Pope John Paul II's words in 1986 remains - on this and other issues of justice and healing - *what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.*