

## **Walking Two Cultures – Aboriginal experiences with Church**

May the God of all and Creator of the Universe breathe afresh on us today and open minds and hearts of all in the spirit of reconciliation, justice and healing with the message I bring today.

I acknowledge the traditional peoples of this land on which we now meet and we observe a 1-minute silence to remember those gone before us. Paula is performing a short praise song.

I am a Gorenpal, Yuggera, Undanbi woman whose traditional lands encompass both North and South Stradbroke Islands and the mainland of wider Brisbane to bottom of Toowoomba range between Esk and Boonah and up to Nambour. I am a proud mother of three adults and grandmother of 10. In my childrearing years I have helped raise many more. I am also proud of my Celtic heritage of my father, a British man of Irish and Scottish parents.

I myself was raised only in a strong Goori cultural setting with immediate and extended family in my traditional country and on the mainland. My experiences with cross-cultural settings began with my schooling on North Stradbroke Island and expanded when my family relocated to inner South Brisbane. My life involved a very active church life which was a strong value of my family and community. Church and visiting missionaries whetted my appetite for working cross-culturally with mainstream ministries doing cultural sharing, teaching and training.

What I learned about myself from early cross-cultural engagement with non-Aboriginal Christians was not very helpful to me as an Aboriginal Christian. I learnt that as long as I talked, behaved and lived as a white person I was accepted into the church community. Today I continue to observe and receive such messages. I find also that as a strong, single, divorced, Aboriginal, woman, leadership and Eldership roles, I don't fit the stereotype of 'widow', 'poor and needy' Aborigine often leading to reverse racism for me. We all have such cross-cultural dilemmas sitting within us but as we become aware of such we can work to progress forward. It lies with how we choose to be and are, ie our self awareness as messengers of the Gospel.

Today this talk will give some insightful information about: **1. the critical role churches have with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – historically and contemporary; 2. Aboriginal experiences of Christianity and missionaries; and 3. the accompanying cross-cultural dynamics.**

In the analysis of the social justice and civil rights movement in Australia, it becomes obvious that churches are the initiators, the advocates and activists which springboard such moves. Churches, prayer and the move of the Holy Spirit brings *'to the light that which is concealed.'* God had a plan for this nation in 1770 when Captain Cook sailed through and in 1788 when the First Fleet arrived. Acts 2: talks of *'tongues of every nation'* being heard and in verse 17 God says *He will pour out his Spirit on all people and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* Revelation 7:9 *...multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language.* It is the

legacy from how the message was delivered that leaves a stain in this land and one we are all called to erase. I commemorate the early missionaries in their quest for justice with their often used scripture: ***God has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.*** Acts 17:26

## **Church and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

Indigenous Australians hold long and enduring relationships with *Church*. To look at the issues of today, we need to look back to where it all began. In a cross-cultural interaction, knowledge and skill building are key for any success. In observing the current and earlier debates about the proposed curriculum regarding this nation's history and in particular, its history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it becomes apparent that the past underlying attitudes and beliefs exist today in some Australians and not in others. For those of us who are formed by the systems of this country or other western colonized countries, we carry the legacy of the psyche of those earlier founders. Some call it Racism. As we will see, this racism became part of early western Church law and, in turn, became the perpetrator and tool of colonization.

In her James Backhouse Lecture of 2006 titled One Heart and a Wrong Spirit, Polly Walker explains Racism “...as the pervasive and systematic assumptions of the inherent superiority of certain groups, and inferiority of others, based on cultural differences in values, norms, and behaviours. Those who are assumed to be inferior are treated differently and less favourable in multiple ways. Racism reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society. Racism is oppressive, because it involves the systematic use of power or authority to treat others unjustly.” Walker,P. p13.

Colonial racism is the form of racism that supports inequalities in relation to Indigenous peoples in colonized countries and has its origins in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Europeans began to travel to lands owned by Indigenous peoples, and to establish colonies there. The colonizers needing justification for claiming Indigenous lands and peoples as possessions turned to the political leaders of their countries, who then turned to the church. In 1493, the then Catholic Pope, Alexander VI whose friends the King and Queen of Castile were engaged in territorial conflict with the King of Portugal. He set in place the Papal Bull *Inter Caetera* which officially introduced church sanctioned colonization by claiming the right of sovereignty on behalf of Europeans over the bodies, lives and lands of Indigenous peoples in the name of the ‘Catholic kings and princes’ and also declared that it was pleasing to God ‘*that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.*’ The Pope’s edict assigned to Castile the exclusive right to the lands lying west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands, including all the Americas and Australia and ended with a fiery warning of ‘*calling down the wrath of God on anyone who might dare to intervene in the forced conversion of Indigenous peoples, their belief systems, way of life and seizure of lands.*’ Walker,P

Other Western churches and religious groups supported the concept of ‘civilising the savage’ that underlay the *Inter Caetera*. Sadly, an attitude of ‘...if civilization and conversion came at a certain cost, so be it’ caused many deaths and atrocities to show the superior power of colonizing civilizations and their religious beliefs. The philosophy of colonial racism provided justification for this violent suppression of Indigenous religions and belief systems.

In the aftermath of such activities and in the pursuit of ‘*saving and civilising*’ the Christian denominations and other religious groups set up missions and boarding schools. The purpose of these institutions was well intentioned in their eyes, but were unimaginably destructive to Indigenous peoples, as the colonizers tore into the fabric of what made up the worlds of Indigenous peoples. Whole nations were removed from their lands, children from their families, languages from their knowing, songs and ceremonies from the keepers, all in the name of saving Indigenous peoples from their heathen and primitive ways. The assumptions of superiority underlying colonial racism supported the physical and structural violence of these religious institutions. Such attitudes reinforced by the incoming scientific racism grew over the years and were well entrenched by the time the British headed to Australia. Walker, P

By the mid nineteenth century, and with lessening religious influence, the governments of Western nations, began to rely more and more on scientific research as a basis for the development of policy and practice regarding Indigenous peoples. In the 1800s, Western Science and Colonial Racism and ‘science’ of race was founded on works of Darwin, Morton and Galton. A focus on the measurement of human beings and incorporation of a range of rating, classification and ranking of human beings became a tool that was later used to exert control over Indigenous peoples. From this work also came the classification and division of humankind into races by colour: the beautiful and the ugly – ‘Whites being beautiful ... dark regard uglier, stupider and more cowardly.’ This classification system continued measuring, sifting, and throwing away what they considered to be the chaff, the Indigenous peoples of the colonized lands. Skulls and skeletons were collected to prove the superior race theories. An American Quaker, Samuel Morton who owned the largest collection in the world – six hundred human skulls – concluded that White people’s skulls were the largest, giving them unquestionable superiority over all the nations of the world. Thus, Christians were not deterred from the practice of colonial racism. Walker, P.

The culture of colonizing grew as the race was on between western countries in their quest to acquire Indigenous lands and souls. ‘*Civilizing*’ became synonymous with ‘*christianising*’ and ‘*bringing the colonial exploitation*’ indistinguishable to ‘*bringing of the gospel*’. This all too familiar history with accompanying attitudes and beliefs about the inferiority, evil ways and uncivilized natures of Indigenous peoples gives us our shared history and the shared legacy as descendents of the colonized or colonizer.

## **The Unprotected years – the first 100 years**

Aboriginal peoples have been in this awesome and unique land for a very long time 100,000+ years. Evolution over these years produced sophisticated land based systems and culture based on a Religious and Legal system so contrasting in expression to the newcomers.

John Harris in *One Blood* writes: *'God was already here and present, active as Creator and Sustainer of every remote corner of the earth. God was not indiscernible to Aboriginal people, a religious people who sought to relate to their environment in spiritual terms.*

Three hundred years after the Papal Bull's *Inter Caetera*, now embedded with its belief systems and long experienced as colonizers, came the British. The First Fleet did not transport God to Australia in 1788, along with the convicts. What the Christians among the white settlers did bring, whether they realized it or not was the knowledge of Christ. Aboriginal Christians believe God's plan was for this message to be brought to this nation but not in the manner it was conveyed.

Aborigines didn't sit around their campfires waiting to be massacred. There were intentional acts of dispossession and genocide. There also existed genuine relationship building and empathetic advocacy for rights and justice. Also, Aborigines weren't brainwashed by the Missionaries – they didn't simply sit around submitting uncritically to the teaching of the missionaries either. Many had serious debates with the missionaries and those who in later years embraced the Christian faith did so after thoughtful consideration. Mayne, T

Since the arrival of the First Fleet, Churches and missionaries spoke out about Aborigines being dispossessed of their land and subjected to gross injustice often quoting Acts 17:26. Their success was dependent on their leader's influence of the political and colonial heads. Some churches had more success with policies rather than stemming dispossession and warfare such as the Church of England, the official church to the colony.

Aborigines had experienced conflicts before but never land conquests and it took some time for them to realize invasion was happening. The early retaliations occurred from misunderstood acts but as time passed and the 'settlers' didn't leave, Aboriginal warfare began in earnest. Across a period of nearly 100 years and spanning varying geographical locations wherever 'settlement' occurred, Aborigines fought the takeover of their country. Survivors were exposed to years of unprotected violence and abuse.

The beliefs and conclusions drawn by missionaries during the first century in Australia were certainly persuaded by the *Inter Caetera* though many knew little of it. Missionaries despite their many duties never lost sight of the evangelistic purpose of their mission and often lived in poverty and very difficult circumstances. A fear of offending the squatters stopped the early missionaries speaking out against massacres and atrocities. Missions offering sanctuary began

cropping up around the country to care for the surviving remnants of Aboriginal people once the initial onslaught passed through. Very little funds were given to the missionaries who worked actively on their missions and advocated for justice. Many had break downs and reduced life spans from witnessing the ongoing misconduct and violence against Aborigines and or the effects of their mission work with Aborigines in situations of poverty.

Most missionaries record that Aboriginal children were intelligent and quick to learn with an intellect to equal white children. Irregular attendance patterns drew a belief that schooling could only be successful by separating children from their parents, therein a civilizing process to change the children. It was believed the adults couldn't be changed ie 'civilised'.

To the majority of colonialists equipped with colonial racism and scientifically racist attitudes and beliefs Aborigines became exotic and strange but not fully human giving justification to the horrific atrocities rendered Aborigines. This also catered to the abductions and sexual exploitation of young females and children due to the shortage of white females and deviancy. Across the State, these crimes produced many unwanted babies, fast spreading STDs and associated illnesses. This sexual exploitation, the resulting diseases and high deaths rates became a necessary focus of early missionary attention and efforts. Harris,J

It is estimated that three million Indigenous people and five hundred language groups were living on their lands at the time of invasion and were decimated to less than one hundred thousand. Geographical location and expansion across the country at different times meant Aboriginal people experienced violence and impacts of colonization at different times and in different ways. Word spread widely through the Aboriginal networks – particularly to the north - with quite accurate news of such events and led family groups to voluntarily seek out the missions for refuge and survival. Harris, J

After 100,000 years as undisputed owners of their lands, Aborigines eventually succumbed to the invasion, occupation and settlement by the newcomers, experienced colonizers with different and more effective technology. Reynolds points out "... they certainly didn't believe that their land had suddenly ceased to belong to them.... the mere presence of Europeans, no matter how threatening, could not uproot certainties so deeply implanted in Aboriginal custom and consciousness." World Vision

In 1824 the penal settlement with doubly convicted prisoners began in Moreton Bay. In these pre-ecumenical years, denominational competitiveness was often a strong factor in church decisions regarding Aboriginal evangelism. The Sydney Presbyterian church initially supported the German Lutheran missionaries in 1838, with their mission at Nundah Hill on Brisbane northside. The Catholic mission of three Passionist priests on Stradbroke Island followed in 1843 and the Bethesda Aboriginal mission was established at Beenleigh in 1866 – 1883.

The missionaries aimed to model self-sufficiency and village life to the Aborigines. Protestant churches formed committees to support Aboriginal missions – Baptists, Christian Missionary Society, Presbyterians, Church of England. The Catholic Church continued their interests too. Funds to the Aboriginal missions remained minimal.

A significant Queensland missionary was the Rev. J Gribble of the Church of England, often referred to as an activist missionary, who established a mission at Yarrabah with two passionate goals: 1. take the gospel to the Aboriginal people and, 2. speak out against injustice. His early work at Yarrabah came at a time when under the Masters and Servants Act, natives, both men and women could be assigned by a Magistrate to a station manager. For all intent and purposes, the native was then ‘owned’ by the manager. Harris, J

Expanding Industries such as pearling, pastoralists, goldminers, settlers moved across the territory continued the violence and particularly sexual crimes and exploitation against Aboriginal people with little policing or control of crimes. Gribble and other missionaries often encountered very young children already addicted to Opium or alcohol, the girls suffering sexual abuse by Europeans, Chinese and Filipinos at a very early age. Harris, J

## **Protection Era – the next 100 years**

The Protection era 1898 – 1957, Assimilation era 1957 – 1972; followed by the Self-determination era, Self Management and the Self Empowerment.

Gribble’s mission was viewed as a possible model for the formulating Aboriginal Protection legislation. His attitude to the natives and model of using Aboriginal missionaries brought the attention of the government and some financial aid. Simultaneously, the voice of churches and Christian politicians and leaders were growing louder. It was thought that the remaining Indigenous peoples would die out in the near future. The Queensland government knew it was time to act to “soothe the dying pillow” of the nearly extinct race of Indigenous people.

Archibald Meston, a champion to Aborigines was commissioned to investigate the condition of Aboriginal people across Queensland. His extensive travels to several mission stations – Mapoon, Cape Bedford, Bloomfield River, Kuranda, Atherton, Thornborough and Normanby River – and subsequent report was the catalyst for the Queensland Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897. This Act officially heralded the era of British law that allowed for non-Aboriginal people to legally impose authoritarian control over Aborigines and as a result Aboriginal people no longer had any control over any aspect of their lives. The Colonial Government representative of the day (ie Minister, Protector or Superintendent) decided: Where and how Aboriginal people lived; worked; when their cultural ceremonies could be practiced and who the Aboriginal people could marry.

Churches were instruments of implementing the policies and also instruments of changing them. Though the management of the Act and its policies was checkered with misconduct, abuse and corruption from both Church and government staff, the Church has remained faithful in trying to bring justice and continue to their social justice and advocacy work. They have influenced the Governments to call for the 1967 Referendum giving Aborigines the same rights as other Australian Citizens; The Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody leading to the Stolen Generations and the Bringing Them Home Report; Land Rights and Mabo; ongoing Justice System issues and many other social reforms in bridging the gap of equity.

For Aboriginal people the 'settlement' of this nation has caused deep and intolerable suffering. What happened in the next 100 years of the Queensland government administration added layers of pain to the already deep and unforgettable wounding. This brings a new slant to the term 'intergenerational trauma'. This is our shared history and the legacy is what you as Prison Chaplains will be making contact with and pastoral caring to.

Secondly, there exists traditional Aboriginal culture and the present post-colonisation culture, both of which you will observe in the carriage of your roles. For some these two are intertwined and expressed differently. Do not judge one by the other. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are working hard themselves in the face of great adversity to 'bring their loved ones through' and for their wider community. There are simple and complex issues involved in the Indigenous world finding a belongingship in the wider society and all of whom carry and express the legacy of a recent history of 'colonisation' in this country.

I want you to note that term, inter and generational trauma, as it is a foundational stone in the wall that you, as non-Indigenous Chaplains, will hit against constantly in your attempts to relate and work pastorally with Indigenous people – not always but often. This is also why it is imperative you stay within your roles and be Chaplains, not counselors, not inter-mediators, not welfare workers, etc. Please do not act from good intentions without Indigenous support.

**Personal data: Murri Chaplains:** *Uncle Ben..... from my family, so relationship there, trust him and he'd walk around and see every Goorie man yarn a bit, read scripture and prayer with relevant message from the bible, check if anyone was sick or lost family members he'd make special effort to see that person.*

**White Chaplains :** *Don't know them, the ones (Goories) who want to 'go good' will see the white chaplains but lot of fellas don't bother and do their own thing*

Particular attitudes and beliefs continue to exist and interplay between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. They will expand the cross-cultural divide and consequently, do confuse the messenger, the Gospel message and the services that church and Chaplains can offer.

Cultural factors including Protocols; Cultural Identity; country; Kinship, Cross-cultural communications; Non-verbals, eye contacting and silence; Space personal space; Family history; all need consideration when entering into relationship building dynamics.

The paradox of the current situations is that while it's players, yourselves as Chaplains and therefore *Church*, seek to give a service of pastoral care and spiritual sustenance to the Indigenous inmates, you are often viewed suspiciously, as part of the problem, as being of the colonizer group that created a system which continues to cause inequity, suffering, injustice, disillusionment and significant incarceration rates. Can the paradoxical nature of such a legacy be overcome? The intention of this paper is to provide some answers, and probably raise numerous questions, in the hope that some of you will seek to find your own answers to equip yourselves better for this type of challenging cross-cultural work.

More importantly, my wish is that you will reflect on your knowledge of our shared histories and be renewed in your views and practice as a non-Indigenous person with a clearer understanding that though Indigenous brothers and sisters are equals to you as humans, they are not systemically as a natural consequence of the society and system operating today. I encourage you all to cultivate relationships with other Indigenous Chaplains or staff and volunteers and be guided and mentored by them. Walking together will bring many rewards and mutual learning.

One of the writers of the Catholic Social Analysis model indicates we must ask the 'why' question at least five times to begin to get to the crux of any social problem and lastly, not assume we know it all or even a bit.

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