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It publishes scholarly Articles in missiology, normally from 2,000 to 5,000 words, if accepted after scholarly, double-blind peer review (at least two double-blind peer reviews for each academic Article, where the reviewers' decisions are final).

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- Promote the theological, biblical, historical, practical, and contextual study of mission, local and global.
- Promote engagement with the cultures and people with whom Christians share and explore the gospel, including, in particular, Australian Indigenous voices.
- Encourage cooperation and sharing of research and experience among individuals and institutions engaged in mission.
- Bring together, through networks, conferences, and seminars, those engaged in mission studies.
- Stimulate publications in missiology, including a journal.
- Affiliate with the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), work in partnership with the Aotearoa/ New Zealand Association for Mission Studies (ANZAMS) and build links with those engaged in mission studies in the South Pacific.

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Editorial



“Witnessing to the Light – from everywhere for everyone” was the theme of the Divine Word Mission Day held at Yarra Theological Union on 12 October 2024. It was also a celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Divine Word Missionary Congregation. The keynote speaker was Sr Monica Cavanagh rsj – Congregational Leader of the Sisters of St Joseph who generously turned her talk into an article for the journal. Drawing on scripture and the words of Pope Francis, she illustrated her talk with a series of stories of people who have been sources of light in a variety of different and difficult situations. She also draws inspiration from the founder of her religious Congregation, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, and from her experience of Congregational leadership to invite all of us to be witnesses to the light.

The contributions to the journal continue to expand our horizons as we are invited to reflect on the writing of Asian feminist theologians especially those from the Philippines, India and Korea where significant networks of feminist theologians have developed since the 1970’s. The influence of different religions and cultures sheds light on issues of gender and community but can also help us understand more fully the multicultural context that is Australia today where to be a responsible citizen we need to take part in interfaith dialogue. These feminist scholars invite us to hear their voice as we struggle with issues of violence against women in our different societies. They also offer us insights about sustainable development, social inclusion, ecological justice and migration.

Two articles invite us to listen and learn from some of the experiences of this land’s First Peoples. A fragment of a sermon from the Tasmanian Woorady invites us to learn the story of the white colonisers of Tasmania and of their missionary efforts to explain a Christian God to those who were living in harmony with nature.

On 14 October 2023, the nation voted on what has become known as the Voice Referendum. The vote was in response to the Uluru ‘Statement from the Heart’ and the long campaigns that preceded it seeking a constitutional voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Nathan Tyson wrote before the decisive and divisive vote but revised his paper in the light of the outcome of the Referendum. He offers us valuable background to the SFTH and addresses negative and positive responses to the Referendum before examining some Christian values that could guide those continuing to work for Treaty and Truth in the absence of Voice.

There are also two book reviews by our generous friend Ross Mackinnon and a reflection piece on religious dialogue.

Michael A. Kelly CSsR
Editor

ARTICLES

Witnessing to the Light - from everywhere for everyone



*“The light shines out in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it”
(John 1:5).*

Monica Cavanagh rsj

(Diploma of Teaching, BEd, Grad Dip RE, MA Pastoral Leadership, Cert in Missiology, Community Work, Spiritual Direction, Cert IV Training and Assessment)

Monica is currently the Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. She has a background in education, adult faith development and facilitation. In 1984 Monica attended the Pacific Mission Institute, Turrumurra. In 1993 she spent time in the Philippines and completed studies at All Hallows in Ireland.

Monica has ministered across all the dioceses in Queensland in education and faith

development. She has served in many leadership roles both within the Congregation and in the church. Monica has also contributed to the work of Catholic Religious Australia, as a member of the Council, on the executive team of the Council and as President of Catholic Religious Australia in 2018.

In preparation for the Canonisation of Mary MacKillop, Monica authored a book Mary MacKillop – A Window of Hope.

[Monica was the keynote speaker for the SVD Mission Day held at Yarra Theological Union, a College of the University of Divinity on 12 October 2024 and this is her talk edited for AJMS]

Gathering in this 150th year of the founding of your Congregation of Divine Word Missionaries, you are being invited to reflect on ‘Witnessing to the Light – from Everywhere for Everyone’.

Such ‘Witnessing’ is central to our call to be missionary, igniting the gift of our Baptism for becoming the hands and feet of Christ in the ordinariness of daily life and beyond. From many places, nationalities and cultures we come, each called to let our light shine within our reality.

Both Scriptural Testaments testify to the call to all to witness to the living God. Isaiah reminds the people of Israel that they are “servants whom God has chosen” to be such witnesses (Isaiah 43:10). Then John the Baptist comes “to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him” (John 1:6), before Acts 1:8 calls all through the action of the Spirit to witness “to the ends of the earth,” as our theme says, ‘from everywhere for everyone’.

We learn that God does the calling, drawing people then sending them to be living witnesses to the tender, compassionate and merciful God they have encountered and learned to trust. So, it is everyone’s call, to share among the nations God’s invitation to find life’s fullness through living in transforming, light-revealing relationships.

It is helpful to remember that it is sometimes our actions that give voice to our words. As St Francis of Assisi challenged us: ‘You may be the only gospel some people will ever read’. It would be good for

each of us to consider: What gospel would people read in our lives? Pope Francis' message for World Mission Day 2022 is a wonderful summation of that:

Every Christian is called to be a missionary and witness to Christ. And the Church, the community of Christ's disciples, has no other mission than that of bringing the Gospel to the entire world by bearing witness to Christ. To evangelize is the Church's very identity."¹

We come to see that to reflect the light of Christ we need first to believe that the Christ light is active in our hearts. This belief can ignite the light in others too. A few excerpts from Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love* make this liberating point clear:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.²

Matthew 5:14-16 too reminds us that our light sparks the light in and for others:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

The candle lit for us at our baptism is meant to light up the whole universe. This light that shines within us is well expressed by Noel Davis in his book *The Joy of Living*

Our Hearts' Knowing and Imagining.
In being ourselves
being alive with the Spirit
true to ourselves
compassionate with ourselves
we glow and become that for each other
You are enough. Let your light shine.³

Pope Francis' words on St Stephen's witness to the light

Our beloved Pope Francis is a living example of being a witness of light both in our church and in our world. He writes often on this theme. On the feast of St Stephen in 2022, he challenged us to see St Stephen's witness continuing in this time and place.

Stephen is the first martyr... the first witness, the first of a host of brothers and sisters who, even until today, continue to bring the light into the darkness – people who respond to evil with good, who do not succumb to violence and lies, but break the cycle of hatred with meekness and love, in the world's nights, these witnesses bring God's dawn."⁴

Similarly, Pope Francis speaks of the witness of John the Baptist on December 17th 2023:

People like John the Baptist – upright, free and courageous – are luminous, fascinating figures: they motivate us to rise above mediocrity and to be in turn models of good living for others. In every age, the Lord sends men and women like this. Do we know how to recognize them? Do we try to learn from their witness, allowing ourselves to be challenged?⁵

Three examples from my own life where I have recognised God's self-revealing light in people:

Catechists who witness to the Faithfulness of God

When I joined the Josephites in 1970, I imagined myself teaching children. The idea of the Josephites teaching in smaller country communities appealed to my heart. In my holiday breaks I would spend time with our Sisters on the Motor Mission ministry at their holiday gatherings where we would prepare children for sacraments and generally enjoy time together. Before long I was asked to move fully into this Motor Mission, another instance of going beyond familiar boundaries to new horizons, an experience of moving 'from everywhere to everyone'.

One of my key experiences here was walking alongside women and men ministering as catechists or Religious Education teachers in our Government schools. Through their on-going presence often to those less familiar with Church, they were imparting to the importance of a faithful God - The faithfulness of the Catechist giving a glimpse into the Faithfulness of God.

My brother Ted's approach to 'time':

Early this year my youngest brother Ted died from pancreatic cancer. Another brother reflects:

I know from personal experience that Ted was a champion in his use of time. My theory is that his constant sharing of his time and energy with his family, work colleagues, local community and even a stranger in the street left Ted's time-bank a little short for being early for such things as a lunch or a cider.

Julia Baird in her book, *Bright Shining – how grace changes everything* affirms what both my brother and I recognised in Ted.

Even the smallest gestures can have a disproportionate impact, for good or ill. We must not underestimate the significance of random encounters with strangers and how even the briefest of exchanges can have an impact on our lives.⁶

Susan Selo – Synod on Synodality Reflections from participants in Oceania

I experienced this message of being a witness to the light ‘from everywhere for everyone’ in a recent webinar on the Reflections on the Synod by four Oceania participants. I was particularly moved by Susan Selo, a participant living in Fiji and the only representative at the Synod from this part of the Pacific.

Susan’s enthusiasm and commitment shone brightly. Empowered by her experience of the first session of the Synod she took the report back to the communities who had sent her forth. She visited all the small islands and communities within her reach, teaching them the ‘Conversations in the Spirit process’, training facilitators and leading groups - even a group of children at their confirmation retreat. Her enthusiasm spilled out to others.

Mary MacKillop - Witness to the light

On 15th January 1842, a light shone on the family of Alexander and Flora MacKillop when their first child Mary Helen MacKillop was born. Little did they know how this small child would influence the lives of thousands in this country and indeed in our world, nor that their daughter would one day be canonised as Australia’s first formally recognised saint.

There were many experiences and influences that shaped her life – the reality of her family life, her giftedness as a teacher, her desire ‘to serve God in the care of his little ones of his flock’ (21 August 1867) whilst facing the many obstacles that came her way as she responded to the needs of the emerging Australian church and colony.

Life threw many different experiences at her. The way she responded formed her into the pioneering woman she has become for Australians and for the universal Church. Her sharp mind, her tender heart and her reflective nature are gifts to us all.

Mary MacKillop’s work as a truly missionary one

In 1871 after experiencing excommunication, Mary MacKillop was advised to go to Rome to seek approval for this new Congregation. She drew on her experience of living in Australia, for she had come to know its people and its story.

She had a real feel for this newly emerging reality, a land inhabited by its first peoples for thousands of years and a place where the first European people settlers were of convict stock. It was a place of beauty and isolation, a land of floods and drought. It was a land in which the establishment of the church required a different understanding. In October 1873, she writes a long letter to Monsignor Kirby explaining the necessity for the Institute.

As the Institute of the Sisterhood of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart was established to meet the many wants of the Australian colonies, and as these wants can hardly be realised by those who have not had some experience of them, it follows naturally that a brief explanation of some may not be unwelcome to those charitably interested in the welfare of religion in that remote quarter.⁷

At times it meant that the Sisters went to live in towns and remote places in the bush where there was no regular access to the Sunday Eucharist or the sacraments. On these occasions she notes that the Sisters would gather the people and recite the rosary and read them some little meditation appointed by the pastor. Mary MacKillop took the heart of the Church into the midst of the people and there she built a Church of the heart in their midst.

She continues in this letter: 'The work is truly a missionary one'. She often reminded her Sisters that St Joseph's true children's mission was to 'seek first the poorest and most neglected parts of God's vineyard' (6 March 1907). She also encouraged the Sisters to 'use every means at their disposal to lead others to life' (12 March 1899).

Mary saw the Josephite mission as bringing hope, relief, encouragement and God's love to all whom she encountered. She took her religious vows in response to what she perceived as a clear call from God to carry out a mission of love to the poor and isolated in the emerging Australian colonies. Going to places for which no other religious were available, Mary and her Sisters lived among the people responding to the God of life whatever the circumstances.

At times involvement in the mission of God meant trusting in the goodness within each person such as the person of Scotch Bella who, after being released from prison, was taken into the care of the Sisters. Eventually the kindness and goodness of the Sisters she encountered, caused her to give up her addiction to alcohol and led her to request to become a Catholic.

Mary MacKillop believed that participating in God's mission meant being ready to move to wherever the need was – to the mining towns and gold fields, living in tents if necessary to keep the word of God alive in the hearts of God's people. It meant a willingness to send her Sisters to Aotearoa New Zealand and to the other colonies to serve the needs of God's poor and to provide a basic education for the working class poor and children in isolated circumstances.

Mary MacKillop's commitment to the mission of God led her across the highways and byways of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, to the homes of those who were poor and destitute, to those who were most needy. Her life challenges us to commit ourselves to work to address unjust structures that keep people bound down and oppressed and to reach out in love to those in our neighbourhood who are forgotten, isolated and marginalised.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge in his feast day homily on 8 August 2014 spoke these words:

Mary's action was all about immense practicality – the love that is hands-on, the love that has mud on its boots. Because she made that journey, which is the great journey of faith, Mary MacKillop stands forever as a witness to Easter.⁸

Mary MacKillop opened the window of her soul to the needs of our world, she sustained herself by a life of deep prayer, by a trust in a good God and by a deep sense that God was the source and centre of all that she undertook.

The flame of faith ignited within Mary MacKillop, kept burning brightly within her as she walked this land and encountered its people bringing to all the message of their human dignity.

Mary MacKillop - Becoming a light for the world

Even when obstacles stood in her pathway and there were many, she simply reminded her Sisters to 'let no obstacle deter you from acting with courage'. One such obstacle was her relationship with some Bishops. Some of the things they said about her:

Bishop James Quinn to Bishop Reynolds in Adelaide about Mary MacKillop:

She is the daughter of a colonial seminarian, impossible for me to accept the government of a woman or to have a community of nuns governed by a lady from Adelaide. I won't allow any woman to make a disturbance in my diocese.⁹

Bishop Reynolds to Mary MacKillop in 1883:

You - from whom I expected every assistance - did your best and still continue to do your best to you own ends to frustrate all my best efforts and intentions. You govern by party spirit and by clique. Hoodwink the Bishop - that is your motto. I am but too well aware of how you have violated religious poverty, how you have squandered (I will refrain from a stronger term) the means of the Diocese.¹⁰

Despite such judgements Mary MacKillop never lost sight of whom she was following. She encouraged her Sisters to trust the light that was shining within them so that they too would be light to the world.

Ah, children of St Joseph's noble and generous heart we must be burning with zeal and courage in the service of our God. We must let no obstacles deter us from proceeding with courage in the path marked out for us. It may sometimes be dark and full of many windings, but a beautiful, bright light shines at the end of this path, and few more windings will bring us to it. Ah this light, this beautiful light is very dear to our Spouse, and He longs to see it shining in each and every one of us.¹¹

Witnessing to the Light 'From Everywhere for Everyone'

Opportunities to 'Witness to the light' can emerge from anywhere to anyone we encounter. This is often a mutual experience as we reflect the light from one to the other. In my own lived experience, witnessing the light often comes in surprising ways.

From an experience of a Sister in the Philippines

In my leadership role one of the Sisters shared with me her experience of ministering on Smokey Mountain in the Philippines. She told me just when she was about to give up feeling the situation was hopeless, she met a woman who recognised her distress and simply invited her to 'look for the decorations'. As she looked around, she noticed pieces of ribbon hanging on shelters, small plants growing and even pieces of tinsel. She generously cross-stitched this onto a bookmark for me. It has a permanent place on my computer, sitting there as a reminder to look for the decorations in each day.

From a visit to Timor Leste

Thirty years ago, we Sisters of Saint Joseph arrived in Timor Leste at the time of the Indonesian occupation. Working with a small group of Timorese our Sisters assisted in preserving the Tetum language by creating children's books to teach basic literacy education and basic health needs. Over these thirty years, through Mary MacKillop Today the work and staff numbers have grown. There are now fifty-one Timorese staff carrying on this legacy in the spirit of Mary MacKillop.

On one of my own visits to Timor Leste, I listened to the stories of the staff's experiences. One story spoke to me of the power of sowing one small seed of hope. In a visit to a rural community, staff met a woman sitting under a tree outside her daughter's school. Having walked her daughter four miles each day to attend school, she waited until school was finished for the walk home. This mother had the courage to say to staff, 'I want to be able to learn what my daughter is learning but I can't read or write'. From this tiny seed grew a whole parenting program to teach and provide parents with basic literacy skills. Witnessing to her need enabled the staff to help bring light in a growing nation.

Just this year, two of our Sisters went to Timor Leste for a retreat with the staff. Both are skilled in using sand play therapy symbols to communicate. One of the staff has created a sand play with Noah's ark and the animals moving in. When asked to share about his tray he replied: 'I am a driver. It is my responsibility to keep the staff safe'. If you know the roads in Timor Leste, you realise what a huge responsibility it is indeed. Our Sisters witnessed to the light by sharing their skills, but they were equally witnessed to by the power of the driver's own insightful reflection.

Remembering Peter, the Homeless Man of North Sydney

I learnt a lot from Peter a person who had made his home under the awning in a street on the way to my physio. He lived here with his Woolworth's trolley filled with basic possessions. On my way one day, I was met by a sign on the trolley 'He was someone's son', telling me of his death. At the physio's, I realised the impact Peter had had on many. People spoke of his gentleness and smile and of his gratitude for those who took the time to speak with him and assist him. We gathered in a simple ritual to recall his gift to us. Peter had witnessed to me by his presence. He had been a light for me coming from an unexpected place.

Three stories from international Leadership meetings: witnessing 'everywhere for everyone':

Every three years I attend the UISG Plenary Assembly where I have heard many stories of how Religious around the world witness to the light often from unexpected places and in unexpected ways, the light 'from everywhere for everyone'. Listening to these encounters bring alive the words of Isaiah 49:6:

"I will make you a light to the nations - so that all the world may be saved."

Restoring Dignity One Person at a Time – Teresa Maya UISG Plenary Assembly 2019

This first story concerns a Sister Norma Pimentel ministering on the Mexico-US Border.

When the first wave of unaccompanied minors reached the border, she hustled to create a parish welcome centre. Calls for help went out. Volunteers and donations came in. Local authorities came and asked, "What is going on here?" She replied: "I am restoring human dignity." Authorities left, returning with yet more volunteers and donations...and the story continued: At the Mexico-U.S. border, they are restoring human dignity, one person at a time!¹²

Little brother of Jesus and Imam: Witnessing to the Light – from Everywhere for Everyone'.

My second story is of Herve, a Little Brother of Jesus, aged thirty-six, and posted to Cameroon. With a background in agriculture, he was involved in a program of professional training in farm-breeding for men predominantly from Muslim villages. Br Herve supervised their work till they returned to improve life within their villages. Other projects developed as the work proceeded, including the building of a village maize mill for women.

Such activities brought together the small Christian and large Muslim communities. The local Imam visited the work often, thanking Herve. He promised he would later visit the Imam's house.

This plan transpired, and after listening to Herve's personal thanks, the Imam spoke touchingly: "Brother Hervé, I have seen you come to our villages for several years now, living with us, participating in our joys and our mourning, sharing our food and our nights: your simple manner of staying with us has helped me to live my faith as a Muslim better and I thank you for that!"

Herve confessed that he did not expect such a statement, and could express similar sentiments because for him too, the Imam's regular presence at meetings, even though he was an old man, had helped and encouraged him in his personal life.¹³

A Journalist's Experience on the West Bank

My third story comes from the New Zealand journalist Peter Arnett telling of an incident when he was on the West Bank. A bomb went off. Bodies fly. Israeli troops seal off the area. A man comes running up to Arnett with a bloodied little girl, saying "You are press, you can get us out of here. If I don't get her into a hospital immediately, she's going to die." Peter said:

"I put them in the back seat of the car and threw a blanket over them. And I did get through the lines. As I drove towards Tel Aviv, I could hear him in the back seat rocking this little girl in his arms and whispering: "Go faster, oh God help him to go faster." Later he started moaning: "I'm losing her! Oh God, I'm losing her!" Peter said by the time they got to the hospital he was emotionally drained. They took the little girl into the operating theatre and sat down in the waiting room for half an hour, silent, exhausted, until the news came that the child had died.

Peter put his arm around the man and said:

"I'm not married. I don't have any children. I don't know what it's like to lose a daughter." The man turned his head and said: "My daughter? That little girl is not my child. I'm an Israeli settler, she's a Muslim girl. But maybe the time has come for us to recognise every child as our child."¹⁴

These stories give expression and meaning to Pope Francis' words on 2 May 2021:

Christ's Church will continue to "go forth" towards new geographical, social and existential horizons, towards "borderline" places and human situations, to bear witness to Christ and His love to men and women of every people, culture and social status."¹⁵

Perhaps this is best summed up in this reflection of Joan Chittister reflecting on the Benedictine tradition of Benedicite:

Thank God that someone has come to stretch our minds and souls. Thank God that someone has come to shake us out of our complacency. Thank God that someone has come to prod us beyond ourselves.¹⁶

"Stand up. I appoint you as a witness of what you have seen" (cf. Acts 26:16).

So how might we who are gathered in this room give witness to the light from everywhere for everyone. Let's begin with the small everyday situations in which we find ourselves, for the mysticism of encounter happens everywhere. It begins with a simple smile, an encouraging word of hope, a listening heart, a compassionate presence for it is often the small, unknown acts of kindness and love that will

transform our world. It is the quality of our presence individually and in our communities, that matters above all, so that people can see the light of Christ shining in you.

As we walk in the shoes of another person it is important to remember words attributed to Michael Warren in 1963:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy, else we find ourselves treading on another's dreams, their memories and their stories. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival.¹⁷

Witnessing the Light from Everywhere for Everyone

In every corner of the world, the light shines brightly, reminding us that no matter where we are, we are all connected by our shared humanity and the universal quest for hope and meaning. Then you too will be 'Witnessing of Light from everywhere for everyone'.

Endnotes

Witnessing to the Light - from everywhere for everyone

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- ⁶ Julia Baird, *Bright Shining – How grace changes everything* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2023), 110.
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- ⁹ Lesley O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop Unveiled* (Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2008), 158.
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- ¹¹ *Letter Mary MacKillop to Sisters*, 10 March 1907 Circulars to the Sisters, Archives Sisters of Saint Joseph North Sydney.
- ¹² Teresa Maya CCVI, *A Vision for the Future of Religious Life*, UISG Plenary Assembly 23 May 2019.
- ¹³ Br Herve Hanso FPJ, *Consecrated Life at the Service of Fraternity in a Wounded World*, Webinar UISG/USG 26 May 2021.
- ¹⁴ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You About a Story from Unexpected Places and Unlikely People* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 120.
- ¹⁵ Pope Francis: *Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord* 6 January 2022. <https://www.vatican.va>
- ¹⁶ Joan Chittister OSB, *The Bridge: Journal of the Benedictine Sisters of St Benedict* (Madison, WI: Advent, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Michael Warren, <https://communicatingacrossboundariesblog.com/2016/09/12>

Asian Feminist Theologies: Their distinctiveness from Western theology and significance for Australia



Gusty Siga SVD

Gusty is a seminarian with the Divine Word Missionaries since 2015. He has Indonesian and Timorese heritage. He completed a Bachelor of Philosophy at the Ledalero Institute of Philosophy and Creative Technology in Flores from 2017-2021. Currently, he is pursuing a Bachelor of Theology and Ministry at Yarra Theological Union, University of Divinity, while also engaged in some pastoral ministries in Melbourne. He expects to complete his theological studies next year and is looking forward to participating in global mission and promoting cross-cultural dialogue within the Church as a religious missionary.

Asian feminist theologies provide a unique perspective on gender, power, and emancipation rooted in the socio-cultural circumstances of Asia, marking a substantial break from conventional Western theological perspectives. This paper critically analyses Asian feminist theologies, emphasising how they differ from Western theologies and examining their significance for Australian society. It also looks at the potential contributions of these theologies' to gender justice, ecological consciousness, intercultural understanding, and the inclusive church's mission in a multicultural society.

Asian Feminist Theologies

Asian feminist theology emerged in the late 1970s and emphasised the common struggles of Asian women, especially the effects of poverty, colonialism, and post-World War II economic growth. Except for the Philippines and Timor Leste, Asian Christian congregations are a tiny minority inside largely male-dominated religious institutions.¹

In the beginning, Asian feminist theologians acknowledged the necessity to address common issues and placed an emphasis on solidarity and a distinct identity from Western feminist theology. A change towards recognising the variety of Asian women's experiences occurred in the 1990s. Angela Wong Wai Ching emphasised the perils of clichéd depictions, while Kang Nam-Soon advised against generalising Asian women's experiences. Theologians started emphasising the significance of economic inequality after realising that women in affluent Asian nations stood to gain from an international system that oppresses others. Theology was confounded by this dual view of oppression and oppressor.²

Since the early 1980s, Asian women have organised inter-Asian discussions on feminist theology. Christian feminists from seven different regions assembled in December 1990 to explore their hermeneutical foundations for feminist theology within their situations. Given the wide range of topics covered by Asian feminist theology and the abundance of outstanding Asian theologians, I will focus my paper on three main areas: the Philippines, India, and Korea, where significant networks of feminist theology have emerged.

These three nations' feminist theologians are mindful of the need to develop their ideas within an intricate network of discussion. One of these is their dual relationship to both Western feminist

theologians and male liberation theologians in their own countries. They introduce gender concerns into national liberation theologies as feminist liberation theologians. The Filipina women's philosophy and practice evolved within the framework of the Filipino theology of struggle, which was created as a result of the Marcos regime's persecution. The battle against Korean military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s developed Minjung theology, in which Korean women identify themselves. Indian women draw towards male theologians who have addressed social justice issues and the inculturation of Christianity within a Hindu or Buddhist worldview.³

However, when it came to theology and sociocultural analysis, these male theologians mostly disregarded the gender question and tended to dismiss it when women addressed it. As a result, Asian feminist theologians must address the gender issue in spite of opposition from their male peers. They have benefited from reading the feminist theologies that are coming out of Western Europe and the United States. However, the setting from which these female theologians speak is middle-class and Western. Asian feminists must, however, contextualise gender issues in their own unique social and cultural contexts since they owe this to them.⁴

Asian feminist theologians also engage their Asian religions and cultures in conversation with their Christian, mostly Western, background. They are very conscious of the conflicting signals derived from their traditions, much like Latin Americans and Africans. Hinduism has been extremely restrictive for Indian women because of its taboos around purity and caste structure. Even though Christianity has contributed to the outcry against traditions like child brides and widow-burning, it has also frequently served to highlight the patriarchal subjugation of Indian women. However, Indian women also seek to assert a positive feminist legacy from their own culture, frequently drawing inspiration from pre-Aryan goddesses and feminine symbols like Shakti, the cosmic life force connected with women, as well as other female icons.⁵

Korean women also relate a history of patriarchal subjugation, particularly at the hands of the Confucian system, but they also assert a feminist spiritual heritage rooted in pre-Confucian Shamanism. Christianity also presents a false image to them, supporting biblical patriarchy and Korean male superiority while also promoting democratic ideals and a liberating Jesus who stands with the Minjung (oppressed masses).⁶ Speaking about Christian Western dominance, Filipina women describe two phases of patriarchy: the first was brought about by the four centuries of Spanish control, and the second was brought about by American and neo-colonial American colonisation, which formed the Philippines in the twentieth century. They argue that female-centric or androgynous creation myths, goddesses, and priestesses from precolonial periods are useful cultural artefacts that may be used to both elevate and critique the liberating potential of an oppressive Christianity.⁷

These Asian female theologians are conscious of the diversity of cultures and social structures they operate in inside their own nations. Indian women can only have ambivalence towards a male-dominated Christian theology that ignored the repressive parts of Hindu spirituality in an attempt to inculturate itself.⁸ They consider their feminist critique to be in line with the struggles of the Dalits, who have also been subjected to Hindu casteism and are considered untouchable people. Similar to this, Filipina feminists work to overcome cultural barriers in their homeland in order to aid tribal communities in their efforts to preserve their native languages and cultures.⁹

The context of the reflections of all three Asian feminist theologian groups is the same: patriarchal traditions, supported by Christianity and Western colonialism, sustain patterns of violence and oppression against women. The common tragedies that women in these places face include rape, wife

physical abuse, incest, sex tourism, poverty, and exploitative circumstances of low-paid labour. However, some challenges are unique to each nation's history and culture.¹⁰

Native to India, Indian women have concentrated on three types of violence: female feticide, dowry deaths (burning wives to find a new wife and dowry for the husband's family), and suttee or widow-burning. The campaign to bring North and South Korea back together has drawn special attention from Korean feminists. Furthermore, they have turned the fight for reparations from the Japanese government towards the rights of comfort women - Asian, primarily Korean, women who were forced into slavery by the Japanese and used as prostitutes for the military during World War II. For Korean feminists, the comfort women's narrative has become a 'root story', symbolising their subjugation both historically and currently. A significant problem for Filipinas has been the vast number of their country's poor women who are compelled to work as immigrants, frequently as maids or prostitutes in affluent Asian nations like Japan and Hong Kong.¹¹

One of the main issues with Asian spirituality-related theologies is Christology. Among these marginalised groups in Asia - the Dalits in India, the Minjung in Korea, and women who challenge conventional Asian spiritualities - a distinct Christology is emerging. Many of them can relate to a Christ who, in the fight against injustice, suffered and was broken. This connection with the underprivileged in Asia, particularly oppressed women, gives rise to Asian feminist Christology. For them, Jesus is the one who came to their aid and attempted to mend their damaged state. This Jesus depicts a God who opposes injustice rather than justifies it and gestures toward a future society in which unfair suffering is eradicated.¹²

Asian Christian feminists reflect this Christology by uniting with the poor, particularly women, in their shared fight for survival, rather than by attempting to convert other Asians to Christianity. For them, Jesus is a saviour but also a guide to a better future free from violence and poverty. Asian Christian feminists do not universalise Christ as the only saviour, even though they prefer to keep a relationship with him as a revelatory figure for them of this new humanity of justice and love. Instead, they frame his narrative as an example of hardship and hope for a loving and just community, one that Asian women who fight to protect life from unfair suffering represent for them today.¹³

Within this context, every Asian women's group aims to create a vibrant combination of liberating Christian ideas and the woman-empowering customs of their own cultures.¹⁴ The Filipina theologians consider themselves to be feministically contextualising the ideas that their country's theology of struggle has previously articulated. This involves three steps: critically analysing social reality, reflecting on it from a faith-based perspective, and committing to liberating praxis. All of this is done from the viewpoint of the poor, particularly women from the Filipino poor.¹⁵

The movement of Asian feminist theology, which is predominantly middle-class, has had difficulty breaking through patriarchal church systems and connecting with the women seated in the pews, many of whom think feminism is too extreme. Recognising their restricted viewpoints, theologians are advised to build relationships with illiterate and lower-class women in order to effect social change. Paying attention to diverse experiences influenced by migration, caste, race, and sexual orientation is also necessary. Lesbians are marginalised in many Asian communities, as are the voices of Dalit women in India and women from minority and Indigenous groups. The experiences of female migrant workers, who confront particular difficulties in their diaspora, are likewise not well documented. Asian feminist theology has to be open to variety, encourage constructive critique of one another and other scholars,

investigate innovative networking and community-building to involve grassroots women and accept diversity.¹⁶

Distinctiveness of Asian feminist theology with the western theology

Cultural Context

Asia's great cultural variety, which encompasses a wide range of religious traditions including Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity, as well as indigenous spiritual practices, is the source of Asian feminist theology. Asian feminist theologies emphasise the need of considering local cultural narratives, practices, and social norms. It aims to incorporate these cultural components into a paradigm that upholds traditional values and advances gender equality.¹⁷ Western feminist theology originated mostly in a Western cultural setting and frequently concentrates on Christianity, however there are important writings from Judaism and Islam as well. The focus on individuality and personal rights in Western feminist theology is a reflection of the larger cultural emphasis on individual liberty that permeates Western nations.

Religious Context

Because of the diversity of religions in Asia, Asian feminist theology frequently participates in interreligious dialogue. It tackles problems from many religious traditions, looking for points of agreement while challenging the patriarchal aspects of each tradition. This conversation is essential in settings like India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, where populations practice many religions.¹⁸ The main focus of Western feminist theology is the criticism and reform of Christian teachings and practices, although it also engages with other religious traditions.

Emphasis on Community and Collectivism

The importance of community and solidarity is frequently underlined in Asian feminist theology, which is representative of greater societal values found in many Asian cultures. It aims to achieve a balance that upholds each person's rights as well as the health of the family and community. The emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom is increasingly common in Western feminist theology. Theological discussions frequently centre on personal experiences of religion and oppression as well as freedom as an individual.

Liberation and Social Justice

Liberation theology had a strong effect on Asian feminist theology. It highlights how several types of oppression - such as social, economic, and environmental injustices - are interrelated. Grassroots movements and community-based activities that tackle problems like environmental degradation, caste inequality, and poverty are frequently highlighted.¹⁹ In Western feminist theology, social justice is a priority as well, although topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and reproductive rights are

frequently highlighted. In the framework of Western social and political processes, it tackles structural patriarchy.

Integration of Indigenous and Local Knowledge

Theologies of Asian Feminism integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into theological study. In an effort to develop a theology that is really reflective of and pertinent to Asian cultures, it honours local wisdom and spiritual practices. Western feminist theology has historically been more focused on Western intellectual traditions and philosophical frameworks, even as it increasingly recognises the value of other perspectives and experiences.

Forms of Activism and Advocacy

The goal of activism in Asian feminist theology is to confront both secular and religious forms of injustice and is frequently focused on community. As part of the advocacy effort, one may interact with local religious leaders, take part in interfaith discussions, and attempt to bring about change within established community organisations.²⁰ On the other hand, activism in Western feminist theology tends to be more institutional and legalistic, emphasising changes to government policies, legal frameworks, and church institutions. Public protest, campaigning for legislative reform, and lobbying are given a lot of importance.

Leadership and Participation

The theologies of Asian feminism encompass collaborative leadership frameworks that are typical of Asian civilisations, which are often communal. In both religious and social movements, there is a focus on inclusion and shared leadership.²¹ However, leadership methods in Western feminist theology tend to be individualised and emphasise well-known feminist theologians and activists as movement leaders. Personal narratives of development and individual leadership are highly valued.

While Asian and Western feminist theologies have similar objectives, they differ in how they are influenced by social, religious, and cultural circumstances. Asian feminist theology places a strong emphasis on interfaith understanding, community, and incorporating regional customs and expertise. Western feminist theology, on the other hand, frequently emphasises individual rights, institutional changes, and a more critical stance towards conventional ideas.

Significance for Australia

1. Enhancing Multicultural Understanding

Asian feminist theologies promote acknowledging and appreciating the variety of cultural and religious origins found in Australia. Australians might have a deeper appreciation for the diverse cultural fabric that makes up their country by interacting with the distinctive theological ideas from different Asian faiths. By doing so, misconceptions about Asian cultures and faiths may be dispelled and a more comprehensive knowledge of them fostered. Further inclusive discourses within Australian academic and religious institutions can result from the incorporation of Asian feminist theological perspectives.

This inclusion guarantees that Asian women's experiences and views are acknowledged and heard, which adds to a more thorough grasp of religion that goes beyond Eurocentric perspectives.

2. Promoting Interfaith Dialogue

There are many different religious communities in Australia, including significant numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians with Asian backgrounds. Asian feminist theologies can promote better communication and collaboration among these disparate cultures since they place a strong focus on interreligious discourse. This is critical in a multicultural culture because social integration depends on interfaith collaboration. Asian feminist theology can assist in recognising and addressing issues like domestic abuse, discrimination based on gender, and environmental degradation that are shared by various religious communities. It encourages harmony and solidarity among Australia's diverse communities by offering a forum for cooperative problem-solving.

3. Advancing Social Justice

Asian feminist theologies provide important viewpoints on how gender, culture, and religion connect. These findings can help influence policies and practices targeted at reducing gender disparity in Australia. Understanding the distinct cultural settings and issues experienced by Asian women allow Australian institutions to create more effective and culturally responsive initiatives. By emphasising Asian women's experiences and viewpoints, this theological approach supports marginalised voices in Australia. It advocates for a more inclusive approach to social justice that acknowledges and addresses the distinct experiences of all women, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

4. Developing Inclusive Theological Practices

Asian feminist theologies promote a contextualised theology that considers the unique social, historical, and cultural backgrounds of each individual.²² By encouraging theologians to create frameworks that are appropriate for the different populations they serve, this strategy can enhance Australian theological practices. Asian feminist theologies can initiate reforms that increase inclusivity and equity within Australian religious organisations. This might entail encouraging female leadership in religious organisations and establishing areas where each individual's spiritual needs are addressed.²³

5. Ecological Justice and Sustainable Development

Asian feminist theologies emphasise the connections between environmental sustainability and gender equity by frequently drawing on traditional and Indigenous Asian spiritual traditions that revere the natural world.²⁴ This viewpoint may support sustainable behaviours that respect the earth and its inhabitants, which will benefit Australia's environmental movement. Asian feminist theologies have the potential to assist Australian efforts towards building a more equitable and sustainable society by supporting holistic approaches to justice that incorporate social, economic, and environmental components. This approach aligns with global movements advocating for inclusive and all-encompassing development.

6. Assisting Refugee and Migrant Communities

Asian feminist theologies can offer a valuable perspective on the unique requirements and obstacles faced by Asian immigrants and refugee women living in Australia. Comprehending these issues can aid authorities in creating more efficient support networks that foster the integration and general well-being of these groups. The integration of Asian feminist theological concepts into social service delivery can improve cultural competency among professionals, making them more capable of interacting with and providing assistance to Asian women and their households.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Asian feminist theologies provide a unique and important viewpoint within global feminist theology with their emphasis on community, interreligious interaction, and the incorporation of local traditions. It is important for Australia because it can advance social justice, foster interfaith understanding, improve intercultural understanding, and create inclusive theological practices.

Endnotes

Asian Feminist Theologies: Their distinctiveness from Western theology and significance for Australia

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- ³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption. A Theological Story* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 220.
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- ⁸ Aruna Gnanadson, "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation," in *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 73.
- ⁹ Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 222.
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- ¹⁶ Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian*, 41.
- ¹⁷ Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian*, 115.
- ¹⁸ Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian*, 31.
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- ²² Bong, "The Ecclesia of Woman", 69.
- ²³ Mary John Mananzan, "Redefining Religious Commitment in the Philippine Context," in *We Dare to Dream*, ed. Virginia Fabela and Sun Ai Lee Park (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 101.
- ²⁴ Han Soon Hee, "A Method of Theological Reflection for Empowerment: In a Perspective of Ecofeminism according to Asian Religious Cultural Value," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 319.

“Woorady’s Theology: Aboriginal, Christian or both?”



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Tim was ordained as a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia in 1985. Initially he served in three rural parishes in Victoria and Tasmania. After a break from full time ministry, where he worked in the accounting profession, he returned to ministry and served in urban ministry and, also with the Uniting Aboriginal Christian Congress. Some of these placements were part time, some fulltime. Tim is now retired and living with his wife of over 40 years, Lynne, two cats and a Whippet. Tim is of panninher descent and is now living on mumirimina country at kotalayna, on the northern outskirts of Hobart.¹

This extraordinary mini sermon appears in the records of the Wybelena Aboriginal Mission where a remnant of Tasmania’s aboriginal people was exiled. It is dated 14th of April 1838.² My brothers, in our own country a long time ago we were a great many men, a great number. The white men have killed us all; they shot a great many. We are now only a few people here and we ought to be fond of one another. We ought to love God. God made everything, the salt water, the horse, the bullock, the opossum, the wallaby, the kangaroo and wombat. Love him and you go to him bye and bye.

Between February and April of 1838 there was a practice of weekly meetings of the Aboriginal Tasmanians at Wybelena on Flinders Island for prayer and instruction during which senior men would address the community. Robert Clark, the catechist, recorded these ‘sermons’. The pattern was for these men to speak in their native language and the lingua franca of the community which was a creole of several Aboriginal languages and simple English. This would then be translated into better English by one of the women who were the better linguists. Even in precolonial society this was the case as men stayed on the same basic social group and county/land, while women always found themselves in a new community and country/land when married. Being at least bi-lingual was normal for them. A fact that George Robinson exploited in his missionary journeys.

This process may not have been necessary in Woorady’s case. He was the speaker on this occasion. He would have known if his translator was not being fair. However, it is also possible that Clark’s recording is a synopsis of a speech that may well have been longer for Woorady was a renowned storyteller and might not have been satisfied with such a brief statement.

Who was this man?

Woorady was born circa 1790 to the Nuenonne people of Bruny Island. This makes him about thirteen years old at the time of the first settlement at Risdon and only slightly younger at the time of the most recent French scientific expedition to the southeast area. He may well have had direct experience of this as he speaks to Robinson about both the French and the arrival of the first settlement ships.³ He certainly seems to have known about pre-settlement contacts in the area. A list of some 200 people at the Flinders

Island establishment and their ages in 1835 includes only seven people over forty at that time. Woorrady is one of them. While there were some others born before settlement who had died during the intervening years the numbers of aborigines who had grown up in the traditional way without settler disruption would have been very few at the time of these weekly meetings. As such, Woorrady would have been well educated and versed in the storytelling and spirituality of his people.

Woorrady is by this time well-travelled and linguistically competent. Prior to his first meeting with Robinson in 1829 at the Bruny Island Mission Woorrady had travelled on at least one occasion outside of the cultural-linguistic community that he had grown up in. He relates a story of crossing Storm Bay to raid the Pydairrme with the object of acquiring some of their women and relates some of the things he learnt of their culture. Woorrady would also have had numerous interactions with sealers, whalers, woodcutters, convict hunters and settlers prior to 1829. At the time of the establishment of the Bruny Island mission it is evident that he has little trouble communicating with Robinson or with those at the whaling station. Clearly, he already had a good grasp of practical English.

Two years of travelling almost right round Tasmania with Robinson would have not only greatly improved Woorrady's English but also enabled him to meet with Aboriginal people from virtually all the major cultural/linguistic groups and to learn something of their language, culture, and stories.

The broader historical and theological perspective

Woorrady's life bridges the end of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century. It is important to understand what was going on during this same period in England and Europe. The Industrial revolution was happening. The establishment of colonial empires was continuing at an increasing pace with active competition between European nations in this space. Alongside this the period called the Enlightenment was well and truly underway. This movement involved the rapid development of science as a way of understanding the world. There were major changes in the way the world was beginning to be understood by philosophers and political thinkers across Europe. Already there had been a move towards constitutional monarchy and political governance in the British Isles. The British American colonies had already broken away from English governance and established a Republic. Revolution had also taken place in France. The first attempt, since Charlemagne, to bring all of Europe under a single administration by Napoleon Bonaparte was well underway at the time of the beginnings of the first British settlement in Tasmania. In fact, the invasion itself was decided upon as a result the global strategic struggle between the French and the English. Despite a general understanding of commonality in European civilization the nation state remained the principal form of sovereign identity in Europe. In this sea of change and political turmoil the British had gained a position of leadership beyond other European powers.

In this context the church and theology were struggling to keep up with the changing world. The church was no longer the unifying institution that it had been in central and Western Europe. The Protestant Reformation had taken place a couple of centuries earlier. This led to a significant change in the relationship between church and state. In northern Europe the emergence of protestant churches sponsored by kings and princes increased the independent power of those states. What constraint the church had had on princely power because of the cultural and religious authority of the papacy was now removed. In the rest of Western Europe, where Catholicism was the main form of the church, much of the power in this relationship between church and state had also shifted. Kings and princes had considerably more influence in church and state relations because of the decline of papal power.

However, by the eighteenth century in some European nation states the power of monarchs begins to become more limited with the rise and increasing wealth of the middle class and the influence of enlightenment political philosophy. The American and French revolutions are clear signs of this. In Britain during this time, we see the evolution of constitutional monarchy with parliament becoming the main centre of political authority.

Ideas about the nature of God and religion were also changing in intellectual circles – for example, the rise of Deism which understood God in terms of simple monotheism and as the “unmoved mover.” This God was defined as being basically opposite to the created world. Creation is mortal but God immortal. Creation is finite but God infinite. Suffering happens to creatures, but God cannot suffer, and so on. God’s role in this context is simply one of getting creation going then keeping his distance.

There is a shift in epistemology. How we know things has shifted from a basis in the authority of received knowledge towards the inner certainty felt by the individual which is reflected on by reason. This process is picked up by the emerging new science. Mathematics and critical reasoning become major tools for understanding the world. At the same time personal religious experience becomes much more important for a religious understanding of reality, diminishing institutional authority in the process. Divergent spaces have begun to open up across a wide variety of learning disciplines.

By the end of the eighteenth century the enlightenment process has expanded enormously. Natural science has diverged into several discrete areas - physics, chemistry medicine, astronomy and botany etc. Political philosophy is underway as well. Rousseau is writing about social contract as a form of consent by the populace for national rulers. Locke is developing a political philosophy based on the separation of powers which will be influential in the development of the United States of America’s constitution. All of this is being increasingly thought of in ways outside of religion. The secular space is expanding rapidly.

To give an idea of just how fast this change influences the role of religion in society there are a couple of things to look at. In 1689 the British parliament passed an act of toleration. This act provided that people who were dissenters from the Established Church of England could take a simplified oath of allegiance to the Crown and would be able to gather for public worship. This would have included Quakers, Congregationalists, Baptists, and other protestant groups. The other is the USA constitution and its First Amendment, ratified in 1791. This forbids any type of established church at all and permits wider freedom of religion. Governance has become basically secular but can still be influenced by the personal religious beliefs of elected officials.

However, this religious toleration does not extend to everybody. Most Europeans in the early nineteenth century still considered Christianity, in whatever form, to be the most advanced religion. So Christian missionaries were encouraged to enter newly colonised parts of European empires to convert and civilise any new subjects of such empires.

The social space for religion is being reduced to providing moral and ethical values to society. What remains of organised religion is beginning to be seen as having more of a functional value to society, helping to maintain social cohesion. Christianity is not yet being openly attacked by the rise of philosophical atheism. The prevailing form of Christian belief and expression is that of Christian monotheism, although personal faith and questions of salvation (as in the soul going to heaven, or hell) are still strong in popular belief.

At this point it is important to mention the influence of the evangelical reform movement that appeared in Britain the late eighteenth century. This was led by upper-class well-educated people, most famously by William Wilberforce seeking to pass legislation to abolish the slave trade in Britain and her dominions. Prison reform was another such social reform issue. Governor Arthur, who was responsible for the setting up of the Wybalenna mission, had also experimented with prison reform as part of this evangelical reform agenda. His system for dealing with Van Diemen's Land's large convict population aimed at reforming the convicts over and above punitive punishment-based imprisonment. In setting up the mission, like many of his contemporaries, he would have had social reform in mind with respect to the welfare of the Aboriginal mission. Educating them to be 'good Christian citizens of the empire' would have been the goal. We would now recognise this as the beginning of the assimilation policy which was to be practised openly for the next century and a half with devastating results for Aboriginal culture and language right across the Australian continent.

When Thomas Wilkinson, one of the early catechists at the mission, reported to Governor Arthur that he had translated the first chapter of Genesis into an Aboriginal language he was reprimanded. Arthur insisted that all education, including religious education had to be conducted in English. The reform agenda was set on an assimilationist path.

For most of society people were still working with a more medieval metaphysic; the three-tiered universe. The earth was in the centre with hell below and heaven above. Personal salvation was about making sure you got to go up rather than down when life was over. The role of the cross of Christ was about the forgiveness of sins and the possibility that such forgiveness would open the way to heaven. At Wybalenna this was the theology that was taught. One of the other speakers in the series of sermons in 1838 was Druemerterpunner. He appears to be a frequent speaker as three of his sermons are in the collection. It is worth quoting all three.

hell a bad place that you like to go there, do you? do you like to burn plenty, plenty hungry and plenty sick. No good place that, but God's country a good country. Heaven a fine place you like it. No hunger there, no thirst there, no sick, no bad people. All are good there, you like it. Then learn to be good. You are not like me. I don't tell lies, I don't fight... (31/3/1838).⁴

Put away your wicked corroberrys, put away your bad things, your wicked doings. Why don't you love God?... You play too much at marbles, you walk about too much, you don't love Jesus Christ enough like me, I love God, I love Jesus Christ, I will go to heaven when I die, no old men there, all young boys there, no sickness there. God love you. If you are good you go to heaven. Heaven a happy place, good people there (14/4/1838).⁵

I say my friends Mr. Clark askem you plenty out of God's book and no other white man ask you anything out of the Bible, me hear him a long way. You like Jesus Christ do you not my brothers, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. We die we go to heaven. Good people always KRACKNY [stop] in heaven. Mr Clark tellem you Jesus Christ die, was crucified. He die a little one, not a long one. Then

he jumped up and went to heaven. By and bye he bring you and me to heaven if we are good people (21/4/1838).⁶

The notes around the recording of these sermons indicate that not all the sermons were recorded. There were occasions when names of speakers were recorded, but no text is given. The very fact that Druemerterpunner is consistently recorded indicates that his speeches were on the money from the point of view of Chaplain Thomas Dove and catechist Clark. This indicates the nature of the theology being taught. It is about personal salvation meaning the opportunity to go to heaven and to avoid hell after death. It is also about good and bad behaviour. Behaving in a way that suits British society is clearly good while behaviour that reflects Aboriginal tradition is regarded as somehow bad. This is also in line with official policy which desired that Christianity should be taught in English.

What does the text, the synopsis of Woorrady's sermon tell us?

My brothers, in our own country a long time ago we were a great many men, a great number. The white men have killed us all; they shot a great many. We are now only a few people here and we ought to be fond of one another. We ought to love God. God made everything, the salt water, the horse, the bullock, the opossum, the wallaby, the kangaroo and wombat. Love him and you go to him bye and bye.⁷

This sermon is unique in that it goes beyond the theology present in the other recorded sermons in at least two points. First it sets the historical context and secondly it is centred on the theology of creation rather than that of individual salvation.

Context and change is the place where the action happens. There is a need to understand both the historical context and the theological change before we can clearly see relationships between these perspectives, Woorrady, his listeners and readers.

Woorrady begins with the trauma and tragedy resulting from the colonial invasion.

My brothers, in our own country a long time ago we were a great many men, a great number. The white men have killed us all; they shot a great many. We are now only a few people...⁸

In making this introduction to his sermon Woorrady is bearing witness to what has happened to his people over the past four decades or so. If we were to imagine a formal judicial inquiry into the European invasion of Tasmania, Woorrady would be a key witness whose testimony would cover almost the whole of Tasmania and certainly the whole period from first contact up until the time of this sermon. Not only does Woorrady remember seeing the first ships arrive but has also travelled widely with Robinson around Tasmania. This included the journey into the central highlands to negotiate the surrender of the last group of Aboriginal resistance to end the 'Black War' in 'the settled areas'. This group consisted of only twenty-six people. Woorrady would have met and got to know these people on Flinders Island. He would have been aware of their stories. By this time, he may well have been the only Aboriginal person still alive to have had such an extensive overview of the story of invasion by the British.

Estimates of the precolonial population of Tasmania vary between 3000 and over 20,000 people. In the literature the consensus figure is around 6000. At the time of this meeting the Wybalenna community numbers about 100 Aboriginal people. Beyond this group there is but a handful of Aboriginal girls and women living within settler society, mostly on smaller offshore islands, and the Laney family in the far northwest. This dramatic population decline took place over little more than three decades, half a

lifetime. At this time the graveyard has almost as many Aboriginal people in it as are left in the living community. Vulnerability to introduced disease, massive cultural and social disruption and war had reduced perhaps a hundred or so different communities to just one, which was also in decline. Woorrady was witness to all of this; so he knows what he is talking about.

I am aware of no evidence of Woorrady becoming a Christian in the classic sense of conversion. This short quote, or sermon, is the only hint that he may have moved towards acceptance of a Christian way of seeing the world. Christian or not Woorrady, in this short sermon, seems to have been willing to accept that the Christian way maybe the only way forward for the younger generation of his people.

... we ought to be fond of one another. We ought to love God.⁹

This younger generation is already significantly different to Woorrady's generation in their understanding of the world. Their world view is less shaped by traditional Aboriginal culture, lifestyle and practice than that of Woorrady's generation and more shaped by the culture of the invading British. Most of these younger people have spent significant time interacting with colonial culture. This has included time in the Orphan School in Hobart where they have learnt to read and write in English and have also been exposed to evangelical Christianity and the Bible.

When discussing the impact of Christianity on the younger generation the historian, Henry Reynolds comments,

The intriguing point is that the young people who were most influenced by European ideas in general, and Christianity in particular, were the strongest advocates of Aboriginal rights. In the hands of Walter and Mary Arthur, Christianity became a means of shaping and affirming a new Aboriginal identity, and a new sense of political agency. It gave them confidence in dealing with Europeans. They absorbed the essentially egalitarian message of the evangelical Christianity that all people were the children of God - that the most important distinctions were not those between white and black, 'savage' and 'civilised', but between sinners and the saved.¹⁰

Walter George Arthur, Drinene (Neptune), Tillarbunner (John Allen) and along with Woorrady's son, Myyungge (Davey) were the signatories to the petition to Queen Victoria that led to the close of Wybalenna and the return to the Tasmanian mainland.

Of the small group (less than fifty) who returned to mainland Tasmania only one had descendants, Fanny Cochrane Smith. Fanny was only a young child, about four years old,¹¹ at the time of these sermons. She may well have been present but what she took in or how the whole process affected her it is hard to know. She married a white settler and obtained a small land grant at Nichols Rivulet in the south of Tasmania where they farmed and engaged in the timber industry. She later donated a part of this land for the building of a small Methodist Chapel and became a leading figure in that church. Fanny also maintained elements of Aboriginal culture. As an older woman she made recordings, using an early gramophone, of songs she had learnt as a child in Aboriginal language. While Fanny had integrated into mainstream colonial society, she clearly remained a proud Aboriginal person.

Fanny was not the only survivor. The descendants of the 'sealer women' continued as a distinct community in the Bass Strait Islands (and on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast). However, they became known officially as Cape Barren Islanders and for over a century were not considered Aboriginal, being of mixed race. There were also mixed-race descendants on mainland Tasmania who had never been to the islands. The most well-known of these being the descendants of Dalrymple

Johnson who had entered colonial society as a small child and who was sufficiently well connected to have her mother brought to live with her instead of being held at Wybalenna. My own ancestor, Maryanne Coates captured in an undocumented settler raid around 1824 was also never sent to Flinders Island managing to live 'under the radar'. There are also other traditions of Aboriginal descent that are less well documented in the colonial records.

After the death of the last of the survivors from Wybalenna officialdom declared that there were no longer any Tasmanian aborigines. This was taught in schools up until the late 1960s. However unofficially in mainstream culture people remembered which families had Aboriginal ancestry. Racism was very real for our people. So bad was this that many in the early twentieth century went to considerable effort to 'pass over' by splitting up families and moving away to places where nobody was likely to know the story. If the children looked white enough, then maybe, they could grow up without racism. This happened in my family.

It was not until the 1970s that reassertion of Aboriginal identity and cultural heritage was able to begin in Tasmania, and it has been and continues to be a struggle.

The exile to Flinders Island was ended by the petition to Queen Victoria but in way it marked the beginning of another form of exile. It marked the beginning of the experience of being exiles in our own land.

God made everything, the salt water, the horse, the bullock, the opossum, the wallaby, the kangaroo and wombat. Love him and you go to him by and bye'.¹²

This last part of Woorady's sermon develops an understanding of God as creator. It is interesting that the list of created animals also includes the horse and the bullock; both introduced to Tasmania by European settlers. It seems it is possible that Woorady is speaking as much to the 'whitefellas' listening in as he is to the Aboriginal audience. In his introduction he has already borne witness to the rapid destruction of Aboriginal society in Tasmania by the 'whitefellas'. Now at the end, he is reminding both his Aboriginal audience and the 'whitefellas' that they are all part of the relationship between the Creator and his creation. Is this accommodation or critique?

In answering the above question, it will be important to understand a bit more about aboriginal spirituality. There are many creation beings and stories surrounding them. They are powerful spirits and are directly related to country. When major change is observed in country stories connected to these creation beings can change to reflect the observed changes. The European invasion provides an example of this - in particular the stories around Wraeggowrapper. Wraeggowrapper is a personification of the capacity in creation for things to go badly wrong. Woorady shares the following story with Robinson during their travels in the Northeast of Tasmania, almost a decade earlier.

In conversation with Woorady said that he saw the first ships come to VDL when they settled at Hobart Town, called Niberlooner; that the Pydairrme natives speared some white men who landed in a boat, one man in the thigh; that white men went after the natives, the natives see them come but did not run away, saw their guns and said white men carry wood; that by and by white men shoot two blacks dead, when they all become frightened and run away. Said he saw the French discovery ships and that the men had white collars on. Said that the white man when they first came cut the head of a man on a tree and children, but the natives never destroyed it and that it is still there at Recherche Bay. Natives call it Wraeggowrapper, and when the children saw it they were frightened and run away. Said when they saw the first ship coming at sea they were frightened, and said it was Wraeggowrapper; that when the first

people settled they cut down the trees, build houses, dug the ground and planted; that by by more ships came, then at last plenty of ships; that the natives went to the mountains, and went and looked at what the white people did, went and told other natives and they came and looked also.¹³

I quote this passage in full because it not only gives an account of the European invasion from an Aboriginal perspective but also illustrates how this invasion was interpreted by Aboriginal people. In the space of a couple of years Aboriginal people had witnessed the 1802 semi-permanent camp of the French expedition at Recherche Bay. The following year Lieutenant Bowen had arrived in the Derwent estuary and some months later Colonel Collins had established his base at Sullivan's Cove and permanent British settlement had begun.

they cut down the trees, build houses, dug the ground and planted; that by and by more ships came.¹⁴

This is the beginning of profound change that that will not turn out well for Aboriginal people. This change is accompanied by violence. Aboriginal people soon learn what muskets can do. The strangers seem to know nothing of proper protocols nor to show any desire to learn. The also seemed to have no proper concern for country/land. They just turn up and do what they want, where they want, with no thought about asking, or the consequences. There is also no respect for Aboriginal law or culture. It is as though these newcomers are blind to the very existence of the proper way of doing things, that has (to the Aboriginal mind) always existed.

Quite early on it seems this invasion was interpreted in terms of an increase in the strength and influence of Wraerggowrapper. If we follow Woorrady's story the carving of a head on a tree, probably having no more significance to the French than the graffiti of a bored sailor, is where this tradition of the rising power of Wraerggowrapper begins panning out as a way to understand the true meaning of the European invasion.

The identification of the Europeans as a manifestation of Wraerggowrapper seems to have begun (according to Woorrady) with the extended visit of the French in 1802, before the first British settlement and has its origins in the behaviour of these Frenchmen. They, knowing it or not, were persistently operating outside of Aboriginal law. The Wraerggowrapper material is appropriately extended to include them. It is updated for the new reality that the people face.

The theological theme present in this recognition of the calamity that has overtaken Woorrady and his people is the theme of theodicy. This takes two forms. Firstly, the destruction of people, culture, and the exile of the few survivors. This has similarities to other genocidal crimes against humanity that we may be aware of, taking the form of the question; why do bad things happen to innocent/good people, if God is good?

The second form concerns country/land. We have noted earlier the close connection between country/land, the stories and the people. It is country/land that is also being changed by the invasion. In his own time Woorrady would have noticed this change and will see it as inappropriate treatment of country/land. Whalers and sealers have decimated local populations of these animals. On land, in some places kangaroos have almost been wiped out and the emu is on the way to extinction in Tasmania. These animals are being replaced by European livestock. Various pests have arrived with the invaders, rats and mice. Also, various weed seeds (such as gorse) have arrived with the sheep. There has been extensive

timber cutting and stone quarrying. The ways in which this is being managed is clearly more about exploitation than in the tradition of good long term custodial management familiar to Aboriginal people. The health of country/land is itself under threat from the settlers. We might term this as ecological theodicy.

When we raise this issue of theodicy it is recognised in the traditional stories through the Wraergowrapper material. However, the British invasion is so serious that its designation as a Wraergowrapper event raises the theodicy question to a much higher level. It can no longer be contained by other creation beings nor by Aboriginal bans on certain activities. By identifying the way forward for the younger generation as the creator God of the missionaries Woorady is passing the theodicy question onto the Christian creator God.

Having spoken of the significance of the British invasion, Woorady then offers,

we ought to be fond of one another. We ought to love God. God made everything, the salt water, the horse, the bullock, the opossum, the wallaby, the kangaroo and wombat. Love him and you go to him bye and bye.¹⁵

What we are interested in at this point is the notion of God as creator for everyone listening. Both the assembled Aboriginal people and the British officers and staff.

If we recall that on the twelfth of July seven years earlier Robinson notes when telling the Genesis stories that he had, “frequently done when an opportunity afforded.”¹⁶

There is by this time little doubt that Woorady both knew and understood these Genesis 1-11 stories. He has certainly got the point that the God that the missionaries were so keen on is to be understood as the creator of everything. Also, it would be difficult to believe that this master of traditional Aboriginal story telling had not got the obvious point of these stories. Everything starts off good with this Biblical version of creation. However, it keeps going wrong. The first people break the only taboo that they are given and so are cast out of the garden and now must work for a living. Then their sons fallout and the farmer kills the shepherd, and is further exiled. Then when there are many people, this law breaking, Wraergowrapper type, behaviour gets so bad that this creator God tries pushing the reset button with the one good family he can find. The great flood happens but this whole process fails to work. Instead, everyone gets together and attempts to build a tower to heaven, essentially an assault on the Creator. Splitting them up into different peoples with different languages might gain some breathing space but it is not a solution.

Woorady can probably see that these stories, although recognisably creation stories, also reflect the present reality of the British just as do the stories of his people. Right from the start they are about people becoming farmers and shepherds and builders of towns and cities, clearing and alienating country/land rather than learning from it. The unhealthy relationship of the British to country/land is already apparent in their creation stories. The evidence of his own eyes tells him that the behaviour of the British matches the problems that the Creator God is facing. These issues are right there in the Genesis stories. They are willing to use violence to get what they want. They ignore the need to work with the rest of creation in custodial ways. The British seek power and control over people and country/land and are apparently uninterested in the sustainability and stability, the work of most of the creation beings. They seem happy to take the risk of letting Wraergowrapper loose. They simply do not see the danger, perhaps even wanting to utilise Wraergowrapper power to enhance their accumulation of control.

Woorady also seems to realise that he and his people are being treated by British as little children rather than as responsible adults. On the one hand they are being encouraged to adopt a new story about one Creator God who ought to be in a relationship to all people based on love, while at the same time trying to frighten people into heaven with the threat of hell. Woorady is bright enough to notice some inconsistency in this. It seems to be more about power and control than grace and love.

When it comes to this situation of sermons/testimonies that all the senior Aboriginal men are being asked to be part of, Woorady needs to be careful. He must do his best to find hope for the younger people in his audience but also not provoke the officers and staff of the mission into believing that he is inciting rebellion. So Woorady begins with a simple but clear statement of basic facts that have led to the current situation of his people but avoids assigning blame. Even the people in charge of the mission cannot deny the short statements of recent history. He then says, 'We ought to love God' and characterises God as creator of everything including the 'horse and the bullock', the most powerful of the new animals brought by the British. Woorady recommends loving this creator God so as to go to this God, 'bye and bye'. Woorady then simply avoids saying anything at all about hell and damnation. He avoids playing the British game about salvation as being somehow about being a good subject of the empire.

Conclusions and possible ways forward.

It is time to propose some provisional conclusions. In his 1838 sermon Woorady points us towards the Christian doctrine of creation and salvation without any sign of having become a Christian. He uses the word God, which he knows will mean the Christian God both to his aboriginal audience and the British colonisers, when he speaks of creation. He ends this sermon by saying, 'Love him and you go to him'. I suspect that here we see him interpreting what he knows about Christian beliefs on the afterlife as something similar to his traditional beliefs where the spirits of the dead return to country/land after death. This could also be in tune with love of a Christian creator God as the means of salvation.

Endnotes

“Woorady’s Theology: Aboriginal, Christian or both?”

¹ This article draws on a larger work by Tim Matton-Johnson that is to be published by ATF Press in 2025.

² N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence* (Sandy Bay, Tas: Blubber Head Press, 1987), 733. I am indebted to Penny Van Toorn’s article, “Before the Second Reformation,” SENICA for alerting me to these sermons.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, 734.

⁷ Ibid., 733.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, 733.

¹⁰ Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People* (Camberwell, Vic: Penguin Books, 2004), 172.

¹¹ Lyndall, Ryan *Tasmanian Aborigines a history since 1803* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2012), Cover portrait information, front of book.

¹² N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, 733.

¹³ N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission* (Sandy Bay, Tas: Blubber Head Press, 1987), 408.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ N.J.B. Plomley, *Weep in Silence*, 733.

¹⁶ N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 409.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart: The Voice falls on deaf ears*



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* Foreword

I originally wrote this paper prior to the Voice Referendum...I think it was a more hopeful piece of writing. Post-referendum and following the rejection of the proposed Voice to Parliament, I have needed to amend both the tense of the text, and also mitigate the level of hope I held, in the original piece. For this I apologise and can only say that I wish it were otherwise.

Introduction

The Uluru Statement from the Heart ('SFTH') was released in May 2017, offering a response from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the debate around recognition of Australia's First Peoples ('First Peoples') in the Australian Constitution.¹ The SFTH is an invitation to the Australian people to support three outcomes: Voice, Treaty and Truth.²

In this article I will offer a brief account of the history and claims of the SFTH, and the diversity of political and community responses to it. In looking at some of the responses to the SFTH, and particularly at responses to the notion of a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament for First Peoples ('Voice'), I will provide some commentary around concerns that I believe were disingenuous or ill-informed.

I will then consider some theological principles that Christians may have used to evaluate a response to the SFTH and the Referendum that was held on a constitutionally enshrined Voice, before explaining my position on the SFTH and suggesting a way forward.

A Brief history of the Uluru Statement from the Heart

Aboriginal peoples have been advocating for recognition of their sovereignty and human rights, in various ways, since the commencement of colonisation.³ In 1938 William Cooper led a ‘Day of Mourning’ protest on January 26th, and later wrote to the King seeking representation in Parliament for Aboriginal people. In 1965, the Freedom Ride, led by the late Charles Perkins, drew national (and international) attention to the third world living conditions of Aboriginal people and the entrenched racism that was commonplace in country towns of New South Wales.⁴ The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra was established on 26 January 1972, with protesters making a stand about land rights and the government policy of Assimilation.⁵ The Aboriginal Tent Embassy remains in place, and Aboriginal peoples continue to seek recognition of sovereignty (never ceded), land rights, and a treaty.

The above is only a small fraction of the history of resistance, protest and advocacy that has paved a way for constitutional recognition of First peoples, truth-telling, and a treaty. Many thousands of Aboriginal peoples have fought (and died) for justice since the commencement of colonisation. It is important to understand this history when contemplating the SFTH and its call to the Australian people.

In the early 1990’s the Government changed the dialogue from self-determination and treaty to ‘Reconciliation’. Richardson and Ross suggest that this was in part because reconciliation type language created less anxiety for non-Aboriginal people, and because ‘reconciliation’ comes at relatively little political or material cost to the nation.⁶ To date, ‘reconciliation’ has resulted in little substantive change in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.⁷ This is not to say that some good relational outcomes at an individual, or even corporate level, have not been achieved, but rather acknowledges that key substantive issues such as sovereignty, treaty, land rights and reparations, remain unresolved.

The Redfern Speech⁸ delivered by PM Paul Keating in 1992, to launch the International Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, was an amazing moment that seemed to offer a new way forward, of truth telling recognition and relationship building. Myself and others in the crowd that day were buoyed with hope for change...that sadly, again, did not happen. The Apology by PM Kevin Rudd to the Stolen Generations in 2008, was another opportunity to reset the relationship between First Peoples and other Australians, however it quickly became evident that this was a specific apology to a specific set of people, and not capable of addressing broader structural inequities experience by Aboriginal peoples.⁹

The hung Australian Parliament following the 2010 Federal Election saw the Labour Government need to engage with a number of Independents, which resulted in issues of the recognition of Aboriginal cultures, customs and law, and Constitutional recognition of Australia’s First peoples, gaining traction.¹⁰

In 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard established the Expert Panel on the Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution, which reported in 2012.¹¹ Prime Minister Tony Abbott then established a Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, which reported in June 2015.¹² Later in 2015 Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, in collaboration with opposition leader Bill Shorten, formed a ‘Referendum Council’ to discuss the idea of constitutional recognition of First Peoples.¹³ This Council conducted a limited consultation process across Australia, with the purpose of reporting consultation outcomes to the Prime Minister, along with “options for a referendum proposal, steps for finalising a proposal, and possible timing for a referendum.”¹⁴ The Referendum Council put forward a plan to conduct a series of ‘First Nations

Regional Dialogues’ culminating in a National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, which was endorsed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.¹⁵

Following thirteen “Indigenous-designed and Indigenous-led”¹⁶ regional dialogues over 250 First Nations representatives, including ‘key participants and activists’ identified through the regional dialogues, gathered at Yulara (25km from Uluru) for a National Constitutional Convention (‘the Convention’) to discuss proposals for constitutional recognition and provide a response.¹⁷ The outcome of the Convention was delivered to the Australian People in 2017 in the form of the Statement from the Heart (‘SFTH’) and its calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth.¹⁸

Voice

As mentioned in the Foreword, the original version of this paper was written prior to the Voice referendum. We now know that the majority of Australian’s rejected the modest request or a constitutionally enshrined, non-binding, advisory body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s).

Despite some claims, there was plenty of information readily available about what the Voice was designed to be. For example, I will quote directly from the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) website, which described the Voice as:

[A]n independent, representative advisory body for First Nations people. It will provide a permanent means to advise the Australian Parliament and Government on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on matters that affect them.

A set of principles that describe how the Voice will work were agreed to by the First Nations Referendum Working Group. The Voice is a body that will:

The Voice will not have a program delivery function, or a veto power.

The structure and role of the Voice would be decided by Parliament through legislation, with members to be chosen by First Nations people.¹⁹

It is worth noting that the Referendum Council’s Report did not advocate for the Voice to be a third chamber of Parliament.²⁰ It is also important to note that the *Indigenous Voice co-design process: Final Report to the Australian Government* recommended that members of the Voice body are elected via regional Voice bodies, ensuring there is representation from across Australia (and not ‘just hand-picked elites from the big cities’ – which was just deliberate misinformation promoted by the No campaign).

The ‘non-binding’ nature of the Voice was contentious, with some Aboriginal peoples suggesting that a non-binding Voice would have been tokenistic or symbolic. While the Voice body would not have had power to create or veto legislation, it would have been an important mechanism to enable First people(s) to lobby the Government and Parliament for desired outcomes – similar to powerful lobby groups such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the National Farmers’ Federation, and the Business Council of Australia. The Voice was designed to provide

an equitable and important platform for First peoples to lobby Government and Parliament to promote their interests.

Sadly, the Voice Referendum failed, with 60.1% of Australians voting against the Voice proposal. A very modest, reasonable, and practical mechanism, to help to close the gap and improve the wellbeing of First Peoples, was rejected by the majority of the voting public. Another day in the colony: Aboriginal people can only have the rights we are allowed by the occupier and their ‘democratic’ Parliamentary legal system (where the non-Aboriginal majority rules). At 3% of the population, Aboriginal people will never have any genuine political influence in the current Australian ‘democratic’ system of government.

So, the Voice was a non-starter. What are best ‘next steps’ for First peoples?

Treaty

The SFTH indirectly references a Treaty as follows:

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

While the SFTH does not specifically reference a ‘Treaty’, it is assumed that the ‘process of agreement-making’ mentioned in the SFTH is a reference to Treaty agreements.

This view is affirmed by Professor Megan Davis, a co-author of the SFTH, who provides the following commentary around the importance of a treaty, and the sequencing of ‘Voice, Treaty, Truth’:

A substantive treaty has always been the primary aspiration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movement. Perhaps that is why some people were confused last year when a series of 12 First Nations Regional Dialogues, followed by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention at Uluru, adopted a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament as the principal constitutional reform. This much should be clarified: these regional dialogues didn’t undermine the aspiration for treaty, they designed a *sequenced* reform in which a Voice to Parliament is the first step, and treaty-making follows.

In discussing the many different views on what a ‘treaty’ is, Professor Davis explains: “We have a discursive understanding of treaty because we are retrofitting that which should have been done at first contact.”²¹

Reflecting about how ‘Self-determination’ has been misshapen by governments into a mantra of “doing things *with* Aboriginal communities rather than *to* Aboriginal communities,” Professor Davis states that “Treaty should be about expelling bureaucrats from Indigenous affairs, not entrenching the power imbalance.”²² (Amen!)

With the Voice no longer an option, I believe First Nations will look to focus on negotiating treaties in order to obtain any substantive restorative justice outcomes such as addressing issues of sovereignty, land rights, and reparations.

Truth

The ‘Truth’ element of the SFTH is contained in the call for a ‘Makarrata Commission’:

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

The Makarrata Commission is intended to be an independent body that oversees the making of agreements between government and First peoples, including treaty agreements, as well as ensuring that Aboriginal perspectives and experiences are included in the documenting and teaching of Australian history (i.e., truth-telling).²³ There remains in Australian society a range of negative myths and stereotypes that represent a form of social or ‘casual’ racism occurring in stories and ‘jokes’ told in social settings such as pubs, clubs and BBQ’s. Racism and racial vilification of First Peoples is also highly prevalent on social media platforms. Public (and well publicised) truth telling is critically important to help address these forms of racism and to enable Australia to mature as a nation.

Interestingly, the SFTH’s call for truth-telling was not envisaged in the initial regional dialogue design, but arose “undeniably” from the voices of dialogue participants.²⁴ In discussions around a statement of acknowledgement or recognition of First peoples in the Constitution, as a form of truth-telling, dialogue participants were firm that a symbolic statement was not the priority for them, but rather they were seeking a form of truth-telling:

...that would inform a renegotiation of the political relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the rest of the nation.²⁵

Little warns that it is important that the concept of Makarrata is not “appropriated into a benign settler discourse of reconciliation, if the concept’s potential to inform substantive change in indigenous-settler relations is to be realized [*sic*]”.²⁶ It would certainly be disappointing if, after the opportunity presented by the SFTH, we see a return to the Government’s ‘reconciliation’ agenda of ‘let’s just all be friends and move on’, as this has not, and will not achieve the substantive justice outcomes and just reparations for First peoples that is envisaged in a Christian understanding of reconciliation (discussed below).

Responses to the Statement from the Heart

Negative responses

Initially the SFTH was rejected by the Turnbull coalition government, with the then Prime Minister suggesting that the Voice to parliament would represent a ‘third chamber’ of parliament that would (allegedly) undermine Australian democracy.²⁷ However, it was clear that the Voice is designed to be ‘non-binding’, with no ‘veto power’, and as such could not be a ‘third chamber’. Mr Turnbull later

withdrew his ‘third chamber’ claim, and eventually joined the campaign for a ‘Yes’ vote...but in hindsight perhaps the damage of non-bipartisanship may have already been done.

The Liberal party, under Opposition Leader Peter Dutton MP, continued to refuse to support the SFTH, and particularly the Voice, constantly suggesting they did not have enough detail to form a position. However, there is significant detail in the *Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final Report*²⁸ to the Australian Government, and it has always been envisaged that the parliament will debate, negotiate and approve the legislation that will enact the Voice. Given that the Leader of the Opposition must be assumed to have a reasonable understanding of the Australian parliamentary legal system, his use of ‘not enough detail’ to muddy the waters and encourage resistance to the Voice was both disappointing and disingenuous.

The National Party stated that they did not support a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, based on the advice of their only Aboriginal senator, Jacinta Price. Ms Price is a controversial figure in the Aboriginal community, seen by the wider Aboriginal community as somebody who espouses conservative/right views about Aboriginal people and communities to gain favour with conservative right politicians and their constituents. Perhaps Ms Price was worried about the influence of a Voice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, elected from their community, by their community, that would have likely often disagreed with her views and opinions?

Some members of the Aboriginal community responded to the proposed Referendum arguing that Treaty (and Truth Telling) should have been the priority and implemented before a Voice. This was understandable when you consider that Aboriginal activists have been seeking a treaty for at least eighty years, and that a Treaty is able to address substantive rights-based issues such as sovereignty land rights, and can deliver other restorative justice outcomes.

Professor Megan Davis, a co-author of the SFTH, explained that one of the primary concerns raised in Regional Dialogue discussions was about the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) funding policy established by the Coalition Government in 2014, which ‘ripped out’ funding from community organisations and saw it primarily redistributed to large non-Aboriginal organisations. Davis explains:

The damage caused by the IAS dominated considerations of constitutional recognition; without understanding this you cannot understand the need for sequenced reform as defined at Uluru.²⁹

Aboriginal communities rely heavily on services delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (‘ACCOs’). ACCOs deliver services in a culturally appropriate manner and are trusted by the community – not to mention they are a source of employment in local communities. Loss of funding to community organisations under the IAS impacted communities significantly, and was, according to Davis, a driver for the delegates at the Constitutional Convention at Yulara prioritising the Voice ahead of Treaty and Truth, with the full expectation that Treaty and Truth would follow.³⁰

There have also been a small number of Aboriginal people suggesting that if a Voice is enshrined in the Constitution that this will mean that Aboriginal nations have somehow ceded their sovereignty. Larkin and Galloway, in rejecting this contention, say:

We note that, for some, acceding to constitutional change represents a loss of sovereignty. From our own standpoint – as lawyers in the Anglo-Australian

Tradition – we seek to understand the Uluru Statement as evidence of a coming together of two legal systems, and thus as evidence of sovereignty never ceded. That the Makarrata Commission... would work towards treaties, speaks to this point.³¹

As an Aboriginal lawyer, I do not see how the unilateral actions of the State in amending their Constitution through a referendum, where 97% of voters are non-First Nations people, can somehow cause a ceding of the sovereignty of hundreds of First Nations. This denies a UNDRIP envisaged process of ‘free, prior and informed consent’, and would deny First Nations people their right to common law principles of procedural fairness and natural justice. In my opinion the ‘loss of sovereignty’ argument lacked a logical (and legally informed) thought process.³² With the failure of the Voice Referendum, the issue is now moot - those concerned about a loss of sovereignty still have the sovereignty that they have never ceded. Yes, the status quo remains, The Gap remains, and Aboriginal people continue to die from preventable causes: another day in the colony.

Positive Responses

The current Albanese Labour Government ran an election platform that included a promise to support the SFTH and to implement all three elements: Voice, Treaty and Truth. Upon winning the election, Prime Minister Albanese reaffirmed his commitment to implement the SFTH ‘in full’.

With the resignation of Senator Lidia Thorpe from the Greens, the Greens confirmed they would support a referendum for a constitutionally enshrined Voice.

There were a large number of Aboriginal people who supported the Voice, including the majority of those who attended the Regional Dialogue process and the Constitutional Convention at Yulara, and many prominent and respected Aboriginal leaders. In the Ipsos poll conducted in January 2023, with a sample of 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people showed about 80% would vote “Yes” in a Voice referendum, with 10% undecided and 10% firmly voting “No.”³³ The Referendum outcome data showed that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country voted “Yes.”

A number of polls of the broader Australian population have been undertaken. Research conducted in March 2020 found that 56% of Australians would vote “Yes” to support a Voice, and that 71% of First Peoples supported a Voice.³⁴ A poll undertaken by the Australian Institute in July 2022 found that 65% of Australians would vote “Yes” to support a Voice.³⁵

The Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT, the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress also supported the SFTH (Voice, Treaty, Truth).³⁶

Sadly, public support for the Voice declined in the months before the October 14 Voice Referendum, and the referendum failed.

Discussion

It is to be expected that there will be a diversity of opinion across any community on any particular issue. The fact that Aboriginal peoples have a diversity of opinions on the SFTH, and particularly the Voice

element, does not render the SFTH or Voice impotent, it rather indicates the level of engagement in the issues that the SFTH seeks to address.

A significant issue of contention is the priority of the three elements: Voice, Treaty and Truth. Davis has (see above) explained that the feedback from the Regional Dialogues informed the sequencing, and that the majority consensus was that a constitutionally enshrined Voice was of critical importance and was to be addressed first. There were logical reasons for this sequencing, not least of which was to ensure Aboriginal peoples could have effective input into Parliamentary discussions around the funding of services for Aboriginal communities. This was not to say that Treaty and Truth were seen as ‘less important’ by delegates, rather that it was considered that establishing the Voice first would address some urgent practical concerns and help to pave a way for the implementation of Treaty/Truth. Without the Voice, the pathway to Truth and Treaty envisaged by the SFTH still exists, but it will now be more difficult and will take more time to allow the light of justice to pierce the colonial darkness of ignorance and racism that shrouds this country. For this reason, I believe focus should initially be on truth-telling via a national education campaign, to ensure the residents of this country understand the truth about the lie of ‘Terra Nullius’ and all subsequent acts and atrocities perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Theological principles: A Christian response to the SFTH and Voice Referendum

There are many theological principles to consider when evaluating a Christian response to the SFTH and Referendum. I will initially mention some broad Christian principles that I believe should be the light by which Christians read and respond to the SFTH, before briefly looking at principles of reconciliation and reparation.

Exodus 20:1-20 reveals God’s message to Moses in the form of the ten commandments, which include (at 15): “You shall not steal.” The unlawful dispossession of the Australian continent, under the misapplied Doctrine of Tera Nullius,³⁷ objectively, amounts to the theft of land without just compensation. Aboriginal people have never ceded their sovereignty, nor been invited into treaty negotiations. It is well time the Australian Government gave First peoples a voice, accepted the truth of wrongs committed during the colonial process, and negotiated a treaty with First peoples on just terms.

In the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus teaches us that the two greatest commandments are to Love your God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. Matthew 22:34-40 similarly expresses these principles:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Similar to the commandment to love our neighbour, in Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus gives clear warning that we will be judged on how we treat the least in our community. We are told that whatever we do to the least, we do to God, and there will be significant eschatological consequences for those who ignore the needs of the least.

Proverbs 31:8-9 also guides us: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” One only has to review the Australian Government’s latest ‘Closing the Gap’ Report³⁸ to see how the legacy impacts of colonisation have rendered First peoples as destitute, poor and needy.

The words of Rev. Dr. Garry Worete Deverell, an Aboriginal minister with the Anglican Church, us the following truths:

Australia is a nation that has become powerful by coveting, stealing, murdering and slaving. Coveting Aboriginal lands, murdering those who sought to defend it, stealing that land and carrying its children off into slavery and domestic servitude. Our church worked hand in glove with the colonial authorities. We participated in the stealing, the murdering and the slaving. Indeed, we actually ran the institutions that did a lot of the damage.³⁹

As Christians we understand that Christ died on the cross to reconcile our sins, to enable humans to have a restored relationship with God, and the opportunity for eternal salvation. What can the Australian nation do to reconcile the sins of colonisation? To enable a restored relationship between First peoples and other Australians, and a hopeful future?

Rev. Dr. Chris Budden provides a helpful perspective on the meaning of ‘reconciliation’:

Reconciliation has to do with the healing of broken relationship, with enabling people to live together in peace and mutual well-being. It has to do with the way people deal with past and present things that have harmed their relationship, with acknowledgement, forgiveness, and justice.⁴⁰

The SFTH offered Christians an opportunity to support the healing of broken relationships through hearing the voices of Aboriginal peoples (Voice), acknowledging the truth of the inequality and injustice of past relationships (Truth), and delivering justice (Treaty).

Of course, justice requires ‘reparation’. Referencing reparations as a critical component of reconciliation, Budden explains: “It is generally accepted that reconciliation involves truth telling and ownership of past actions, sorrow, reparation and, finally, forgiveness.”⁴¹

In Luke 19:1-10⁴² we see the story of Zacchaeus, a corrupt tax collector, who was despised by the Jews, repents, and changes his life on meeting Jesus. The repentance of Zacchaeus involved him giving half of his possessions to the poor and offering to repay anyone he had cheated four times what he had taken. An apology and forgiveness was insufficient – there had to be a recognition of the shared history that Zacchaeus had with the people, and of how this past relationship continued to impact people’s lives.⁴³ The SFTH, and elements of Voice, Treaty, Truth, were a vehicle through which the Australian people could have delivered ‘reconciliation’ in Christian terms. The recent rejection of the Voice element of the

SFTH by the Australian public has unfortunately given call to ask whether the last 30 years of ‘reconciliation’ (and the related work of Reconciliation Australia) has been effective...or perhaps ‘reconciliation’ has just been colonial code for: ‘We will assimilate the natives eventually if we keep them distracted by pretending we care’? Perhaps that is too sceptical? Or perhaps the recent referendum outcome, and the rejection of even a very modest, non-binding advisory body for First peoples, tends to warrant and/or justify a healthy amount of scepticism?

From a Uniting Church perspective, we have acknowledged our faith-based commitment to addressing injustice and building relationships with First peoples, through public statements of commitment, including the 1988 Statement to the Nation,⁴⁴ the 1994 Covenanting Statement,⁴⁵ and the amendment to the Preamble to the UCA Constitution in 2009.⁴⁶ It is worth reflecting on the following paragraphs from the Preamble to the UCA Constitution:

...Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.

The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished...

If Christians accept that the teachings of Jesus guide us in the way we are to live and act, it is clear that there is a theological imperative for Christians to stand in solidarity with First peoples seeking justice, and to support the SFTH and its remaining goals of Treaty and Truth.

My position on the Statement from the Heart and the way forward

As an Aboriginal Christian, and a passionate advocate for justice for Aboriginal peoples for over thirty years, I supported the full implementation of all three elements: Voice, Treaty, Truth. With the Voice no longer an option, I continue to support the call for truth-telling and Treaty.

In hindsight, perhaps Treaty or truth should have been the initial priority, however I understand the logic, explained by Davis, that the representatives in the Regional Dialogues and at the Constitutional Convention at Yulara, felt that a Voice to Parliament was urgent for practical reasons (i.e., to fix funding policies) and that a Voice would create a pathway into what are likely more difficult and controversial discussions around a Treaty.

I was initially frustrated that the proposed ‘non-binding’ Voice was not a substantive rights-based voice as envisaged by Article 19 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (‘UNDRIP’).⁴⁷ My lived experience is that Governments have consistently refused to acknowledge or

act on the advocacy voices of First peoples,⁴⁸ so I didn't see much utility in a 'non-binding' Voice. However, over time, I had an epiphany of sorts – it does not matter that the Voice is non-binding, because First peoples will be able to seek an Article 19 UNDRIP type voice via a Treaty. The Albanese Government committed to implementing all three elements of the SFTH...so with the failure of the Voice referendum, Truth and Treaty are logically next.

I had also considered that the Voice would ensure a level of accountability of parliament and government(s) to the Australian People, as formal advice from the Voice body to the parliament and government would have been on the public record. I believed most Australians want to be able to get the work of restorative justice done and be able to heal this nation and move forward. I had genuinely thought Australian attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples and communities were changing for the better, and perhaps the 39.9% of Yes voters in the Voice Referendum are actually indicative of some positive change...however, it is clear this country still has a long path to travel to effectively shed its colonial baggage of racism and discrimination towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The final reason I supported the Voice is because I believed it was important to at least give the Voice a chance. I wanted to see if the Voice could help this country move forward towards Treaty and Truth, and to help this nation become the nation we should be: A nation where First peoples are recognised, respected and have sovereignty and self-determination over our own affairs, and where we can make space for non-Aboriginal Australians to co-exist as part of a modern, diverse, and multicultural Australia.

Conclusion

As Christians we should have supported the SFTH and its three elements: Voice, Treaty, Truth. We should now be supporting the remaining two elements: Truth and Treaty. There is ample theological basis for supporting the SFTH, as it is caring for the least, loving our neighbour, and speaking up to defend the rights of the poor and needy. The SFTH is an invitation from First Peoples to right wrongs through recognition, reparations, healing, and eventually, hopefully, a form of reconciliation.

I believe the elements of Treaty and Truth are critical to the success of the SFTH, and to the healing of many wounds that continue to cause pain for First Peoples. Treaty can and should address the substantive, restorative justice, and reparations outcomes that are required for genuine reconciliation.

I expect that the road to justice via Treaty and Truth will at times be challenging. I expect that there will be pockets of resistance from those who cannot see the hope that the SFTH offers, and from those who are unable to overcome their racism and prejudice towards First peoples. There will also be some First people, who reject the SFTH for various personal reasons – some with a form of legitimacy, others based on scepticism and/or misunderstanding. This is the nature of our democracy: people are entitled to their opinions.

I conclude by acknowledging that the SFTH was, and remains, a generous offer from the delegates at the National Constitutional Convention to the Australian people. While the failure of the Voice referendum has been deeply disappointing, there is nothing that can change history. We need to move forward. We need truth-telling and Treaties. We need to see justice done. We need healing. We need peace.

Endnotes

The Uluru Statement from the Heart: The Voice falls on deaf ears*

- ¹ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48 (2020), 30.
- ² The Uluru Statement from the Heart text can be read here: https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF
- ³ Early resistance, known as the 'frontier wars' has been documented, for example, research from the University of Newcastle has found that over 10,000 Aboriginal people were killed in over 416 massacres between 1780 and 1930, see for example: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/over-100-colonial-era-massacres-added-to-ongoing-project/qr2wi3ezc> . A time-lapse map of massacre sites in Australia, that has a capacity to filter by perpetrator groups, is viewable here: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars>
- ⁴ See: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/1965-freedom-ride>
- ⁵ B. Carlson, and L. Coe, "A Short History of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy", Reconciliation News, Reconciliation Australia. May 2022. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/a-short-history-of-the-aboriginal-tent-embassy/> . Note: this article also explains: "The term "embassy" was used to bring attention to the fact Aboriginal people had never ceded sovereignty nor engaged in any treaty process with the Crown. As a collective, Aboriginal people were the only cultural group not represented with an embassy."
- ⁶ B. J. Richardson, and H. Ross, "The 'Uluru Statement from the Heart': Investigating Indigenous Australian Sovereignty," *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, Vol.23 (1-2) (2020), 20.
- ⁷ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48 (2020), 33.
- ⁸ See: <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008765.pdf>
- ⁹ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48, (2020), 33.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution: Report of the Expert Panel (2012) <https://www.indigenousjustice.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/mp/files/resources/files/12-01-16-indigenous-recognition-expert-panel-report.pdf>
- ¹² P. Anderson, and M. Leibler, *Final report of the Referendum Council*, Australian Referendum Council (2017), 17. Accessed February 4, 2023, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-749655424>
- ¹³ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48 (2020), 33.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 33.
- ¹⁵ P. Anderson, and M. Leibler, *Final report of the Referendum Council*, Australian Referendum Council, (2017), 17. Accessed February 4, 2023, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-749655424>
- ¹⁶ G. Appelby, and M. Davis, "The Uluru Statement and the Promises of Truth," *Australian Historical Studies*, 49.4, (2017), 501.
- ¹⁷ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol. 48, (2020), 34.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ See: <https://voice.niaa.gov.au/#>
- ²⁰ B.J. Richardson, and H. Ross, "The 'Uluru Statement from the Heart': Investigating Indigenous Australian Sovereignty," *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, (2020), 22.
- ²¹ M. Davis, "Voice, Treaty, Truth", *The Monthly* (July 2018). <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/july/1530367200/megan-davis/voice-treaty-truth#mtr>
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ G. Appelby, and M. Davis, "The Uluru Statement and the Promises of Truth," *Australian Historical Studies*, 49.4 (2017), 504.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 503.
- ²⁵ G. Appelby, and M. Davis, "The Uluru Statement and the Promises of Truth," *Australian Historical Studies*, 49.4 (2017), 503.
- ²⁶ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48 (2020), 30.
- ²⁷ A. Little, "The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia," *Political Theory*, Vol.48 (2020), 34.
- ²⁸ See: <https://voice.niaa.gov.au/final-report#>
- ²⁹ M. Davis. "Voice, Treaty, Truth, *The Monthly* (July 2018). <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/july/1530367200/megan-davis/voice-treaty-truth#mtr>
- ³⁰ M. Davis, "Voice, Treaty, Truth," *The Monthly* (July 2018). <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/july/1530367200/megan-davis/>

voice-treaty-truth#mtr

³¹ D. Larkin, and K. Galloway, "Uluru Statement from the Heart: Australian Public Law Pluralism," *Bond Law Review*, Vol.30.2 (2018), 339.

³² For example, if the Australia held a referendum to create a body for New Zealand to have a non-binding voice to our Parliament...would that allow the Australian Government to advise NZ that that they have ceded their sovereignty to Australia? Of course not!

³³ The Guardian (digital), 27 January 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/27/uluru-statement-architect-confident-of-indigenous-voice-success-despite-invasion-day-calls-to-vote-no>

³⁴ See: <https://fromtheheart.com.au/press-release/poll-shows-strong-rise-in-support-for-constitutional-change-to-create-indigenous-voice-to-parliament/>

³⁵ See: <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-voice-to-parliament-in-the-constitution/>

³⁶ This decision has been recently confirmed via the *First Peoples Network* hosted by UnitingCare Australia, with First Peoples representatives from the UAICC, all Synods of the Uniting Church in Australia, and all UnitingCare agencies around the country. The author is a member of the *First Peoples Network*, representing the Synod of NSW and the ACT.

³⁷ See: *Mabo and others v. Queensland (No. 2)* [1992] HCA 23; (1992) 175 CLR 1 F.C. 92/014 (3 June 1992). https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCATrans/1991/23.html?context=1;query=Mabo;mask_path=

³⁸ Due to word limit I will not go into detail about the ongoing socio-economic disadvantage facing First Peoples in Australia, but the 2022 Closing the Gap Report can be accessed here: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/news-centre/indigenous-affairs/commonwealth-closing-gap-annual-report-2022>

³⁹ G. Deverell, G, "The Law, the Prophets and Justice for First Peoples," *Uncommon Prayers (Blog)*: <https://uncommonprayers.blogspot.com/2023/02/the-law-prophets-and-justice-for-first.html>

⁴⁰ C. Budden, C. (2009). *Following Jesus in invaded space: Doing theology on Aboriginal land,* Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 116, (Pickwick Publications, 2009), 154.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴² Luke 19:1-10: "Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

⁴³ C. Budden, "Reconciliation and Reparation: Building Just Relationships between First and Second Peoples," *Uniting Church Studies* 16.1 (2010), 51.

⁴⁴ See: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/133-statement-to-the-nation-australian-bicentennial-year-1988#>

⁴⁵ See: <https://resources.uca.org.au/resources/covenanting/item/135-covenanting-statement-1994>

⁴⁶ See: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/covenanting/PreamblePoster-web.pdf>

⁴⁷ Article 19 of the UNDRIP states: "States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them." See: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

⁴⁸ I offer, as just one example the failure of the Coalition Government to heed the voices of Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) advocacy groups prior to the implementation of the Northern Territory Intervention... history has shown the knowledge and wisdom of these voices, and sadly significantly harm to Aboriginal peoples and communities resulted from the failure of the Government to listen to these voices.

BOOK REVIEWS

Learning to Love: Utilising Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission



by Sue M Holdsworth

Published by: Wipf & Stock, Eugene OR, USA, 2024, Kindle version

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Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the Australian Journal of Mission Studies.

Dr Sue Holdsworth is a mission scholar. Originally from Britain, she has had extensive experience working with migrant communities in Melbourne and overseas. In his foreword to this book, Steve Taylor says: Learning to Love constructs a practical theology of volunteering – what Dr Holdsworth calls “grace in action”. Grace in action involves pastoral care, understood as hospitality given, received and mutually shared.

Sue Holdsworth contends that Christian mission is primarily pastoral care. As she puts it: *Love is the reason for Christian mission. Where love of God is expressed, mission naturally takes place.* Pastoral care is more than just reacting to someone in crisis. When churches seek to engage with their local communities and offer programs which are needed by their communities, these programs should be regarded as pastoral care and should be planned and executed with this in mind.

Using her own experience, her own research and the research of other scholars, she explores the concept of mission as pastoral care. Central to this book are the initiatives of four Melbourne churches who offer programs needed by their local multicultural communities. Two of these churches offer English classes, one offers a sewing class for women, and one offers courses which enable the students to become trained child care workers. Each church is engaging with migrants, which means that the volunteers have to come to grips with intercultural issues and deal with these in a caring way. The volunteers have to learn to be aware of their assumptions, prejudices and ethnocentricity. As the author says: *I suggest an approach to mission that requires self-understanding and frequent reflection.*

Keeping a low profile, the author spent several months with each of the four churches, observing, noting, and talking to participants, volunteers and pastors. She analyses her collected data and appraises the work of each of the four church initiatives, using as her yardstick the thesis that mission is pastoral care which needs careful planning, appropriate supervision, prayer, and reflection. Furthermore, in offering programs to non-Christians, seeking to convert them to Christianity is not a priority. The key issue is to show love. The volunteers need to learn to listen because the participants have much to offer in turn. The author says: *We are called to keep loving, learning from, and receiving the good gifts that others bring*

into our lives...A deeper understanding of others comes from listening to their stories – both cultural and personal.

Three major themes emerge from the author's study of the initiatives of the four churches – expressions of love (i.e., pastoral care), motivations, and skills, and the author devotes a chapter to each of these three themes which raise all sorts of questions which the author discusses. What skills do the volunteers have? Are they the appropriate skills? As these skills being used well? Do these skills need improvement? How is love being expressed? Is pastoral care a priority? What spiritual background does each volunteer have? What motivates the volunteers? Are these motivations based in love or duty? Is conversion a motivation?

This book is refreshing, well-researched, thoughtful and helpful. My own church (also in suburban Melbourne) runs several intercultural initiatives for migrants in the local community. As I read the book, I found myself measuring my church's initiatives against the author's thesis that mission is pastoral care. Others in the same situation would do likewise and benefit from it.

The book includes questions for discussion and an extensive bibliography. Anyone interested in Christian mission, Christian love, and Christian pastoral care should read this book. It is particularly pertinent for church volunteers working with migrants and asylum seekers.

PS – Sue Holdsworth has a blogspot worth visiting - - [Mission21c](#) – Mission that's relevant to the times we live in. She posts helpful weekly reflections.

Community as Church, Church as Community



By Michael Plekon

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Reviewed by Ross Mackinnon

Past editor of the Australian Journal of Mission Studies.

Michael Plekon is an American Orthodox priest and scholar with a special interest in religion and society. In this book, he argues the case that church is best understood as a communal reality, as community (p2). He pursues this theme against the backdrop of declining congregations in the USA where congregational memberships have reduced substantially. Churches built to seat 1500 people, for example, now might be lucky to have 50 members. Plekon points out that the average size of churches in the USA is 70 people, and this average includes the well-known mega-churches. Most congregations in the USA are small.

Congregations have declined for many reasons – younger generations move away from home; people no longer need a church for social reasons; doctrine, dogma, and ecclesiastical rules and structures are irrelevant; intellectual dissatisfaction with theology; hypocrisy, scandals, bickering, corruption within churches; the mobility of people across the nation, and so on. Nowadays, people under 40, in particular, rarely have connection with churches.

Plekon contends that these things must be confronted, not ignored. He contends that death and resurrection are integral to the Christian faith, and that if congregations grind to a halt, then they must seek new life in new and unexpected ways. Plekon gives fascinating examples of congregations who have done this. Some churches have merged, some have closed down and a new congregation has been planted in place of the former congregation, some have sold their buildings and opted for house churches, and many have looked outward to the community and have opened their buildings to the public, so that they are used every day of the week. When this happens, the church members make valuable links with the public by providing services such as food banks, soup kitchens, after-school assistance with homework, English as a Second Language classes, to name a few. Plekon points out that churches do not live for themselves. Churches are there to give and share abundant life to all the world. Communities are built up when they share abundant life. Key elements of congregational life are worship, witness and service, and to offer service, congregations must look outwards.

Churches who can no longer pay for a full-time pastor either do without one or employ one part-time. When this happens, the church members step up and take on many tasks usually undertaken by the pastor.

We live in changing times, but harking back to the good old days is not an option. The examples Plekon gives of what struggling congregations have done and can do are astonishing, creative and in many cases, very brave. Plekon makes it clear that there is no one generic solution to coping with declining numbers, and stresses that the examples he gives are works in progress.

One of the themes running through the book is what the first Christian churches did. They were small, diverse congregations, they did not have ordained clergy, there was no separation of leaders and members, and they were not burdened with ecclesiastical trappings such as hierarchies, canon law, doctrine and dogma. The only law they had was to love one another. Plekon argues that all congregations should be like this, and he boldly throws out the challenge – are ordained clergy needed these days? And he argues strongly that the parish model for churches is well out of date.

Most of Michael Plekon's examples of congregational life and change are from the USA, with a few from Canada and the UK. Given that Australian congregations are struggling with the same issues, his book is highly applicable to the Australian scene, and we Down Under can gain much from it. It took me a while to read the book because I kept stopping to google the churches he mentions to see what new ventures are being attempted.

Basically, what the author is doing is to get readers to deal with the crucial question – What is the church for, and thus, what are the community and pastors for? If that can be answered by serving the wider community, then congregations are on the right track.

This book is encouraging, relevant and hopeful. It makes for engaging and thought-provoking reading and would appeal to a wide audience.

REFLECTION

LOVING MUSLIMS INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD



The Rev Dr Bruce Nicholls

Rev Dr Nicholls is a contextual theologian who with his wife Kathleen, taught at the Union Biblical Seminary in central India for 18 years. He then went on to found the Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI) in New Delhi, and later pastored the CNI church in Gurgaon, Haryana state.

He is also the founder of the Theological Commission of the WEF and edited their theological journal for 20 years. He is the author of many books and articles. His latest writing is on Christian Art in India in honour of his wife who was international known for her contribution to traditional art media in Asia. He is a graduate of the universities of Auckland, London and Princeton Theological Seminary. Their three children graduated from Woodstock School in north India and then from universities in New Zealand.

Two major issues in the relationship of Christianity to Islam are first the link between faith and good works in finding eternal life, and second, the limits to God's love: Is his love only for the doers of good?

The answer to these questions is not a simple yes or no, and the reason for this ambiguity is that contrary to the rational answer of yes or no, we are dealing with the complexity of this relationship which is both yes and no. This applies to both Christianity and Islam and the relationship between them.

Jesus belonged to the cultures of Asia. When challenged as to his relationship to God, he did not give a logical and rational answer but always responded as a storyteller of parables, based on his experience with nature and with his village experiences. The only time he responded rationally was in confronting evil satanic powers and in confronting the rationally-minded teachers of the law and the Pharisees,

In the case of Muslims, the only way to love them into the kingdom is to build relationships of mutual trust and openness to their beliefs and behaviour. We can do this because at the heart of every person, irrespective of ideology or religion, is the inner awareness of right and wrong and a deep inner longing to be at peace with transcendent reality, be it the cosmic One beyond gods and goddesses, as in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism (and to a lesser extent, Sikhism) or some other Reality such as the creator God of the monotheistic Faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The religious practices that come closest to Christianity are the Primal, tribal religions with their deep awareness of the spirit world of good and evil, the need for a high god above the tribal gods and goddesses, and the practice of blood sacrifice to appease the good and evil spirits. Tribal religions come closest to the complex story of good and evil as found in Genesis 3-11.

To love people of other faiths into the kingdom is only possible because all people are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and in mind, heart and soul all people are seekers after the truth of this image. Humans are unique in the world of nature. According to the mythic account of creation, we were created on the same sixth day of , along with the animal kingdom, and have many

common characteristics, but as humans we are distinct in our ability to communicate with our divine Creator.

Humans do not share the essential being of God, but we are like him in his attributes of holiness, justice and loving kindness.

These attributes are seen in the gift of rational thinking, in the gift of creativity as seen in the plurality of art forms for which Asians are well known, and in designing and building temples and houses. An important distinction of being human is the gift of languages, of which there are several thousand in Asia alone, each with its own grammar and syntax. Human beings are distinctive in distinguishing the ethics of right and wrong and in the gifts of meditation and prayer. The gift of love binds each of these aspirations together. Animals have an instinctive love for their offspring but live in constant fear of death from other animals. For some humans their level of love is similar to that of the animal world. They love their offspring but have hate and even kill those who frustrate their beliefs and practices.

Sitting at Jesus' feet

In order to understand the way of love - and in this article we limit our focus to loving Muslims - we need to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him. An expert in the laws of Moses came to Jesus to test his views on what he must do to be sure of eternal life (Luke 10:25-27). He had heard Jesus preaching that he was sent from God and that eternal life consisted in trusting in him alone. Whereas he (the inquirer) was convinced that eternal life was the sole inheritance of those who kept the laws of Moses. Jesus turned the question around and asked him, "How do you read the law?" The lawyer, who knew his scriptures well, rightly replied, "Love the Lord you God with all your heart soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself" (quoting Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18). No doubt he had heard Jesus on other occasions bringing these passages together, and so he was able to quote them. When Jesus commended him for his answer, he said to him, "Do this and you will live." In this answer he was stressing the relationship between faith and good works.

When the lawyer, in order to justify himself, then asked, "Who then is my neighbour?" Jesus replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan on how a foreign Samaritan helped a hated Jew in his time of extreme need. The priest and the Levite passed by the wounded man, because for them religious observance was more important than helping a person in desperate need. The despised Samaritan, motivated by compassion, did not separate his faith in God from his act of mercy. He even went further by offering to pay the innkeeper the full cost of caring for the wounded man. Love for God and his neighbour overcame his theological prejudices.

The same incident is recorded in Matt 22:35-40 and in Mark 12:28-34 but with a different question: "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" and with Jesus giving the same answer. It is probable that different questions were being asked by different lawyers at this time.

The Qur'an doesn't answer the question of the relationship between faith and good deeds. In the first five Surahs I counted five times the saying, "Allah loves the doers of good." The Quran's response to the doers of wrong is that they are destined for the fires of eternal hell. Allah has no love for those who do wrong. Surah al-Tawbah (Surah 9) was probably received at the end of Muhammad's life. It calls Muslim believers to kill the polytheists and unbelievers (9:5, 30, 39, 123). In an article titled the complete "Islamic Personality," Imam Hasan Al-Banna calls Muslims to correct worship, to live strong physical lives, to build strong personalities through intellect and educational vigour, to fight against

basic desires, and to strictly control their own lives.¹ No mention is made of compassion for others. With this determined self-will religion it is not surprising that Islam is constantly at war within itself and with all nonbelievers and with hostile nations.

In the Christian faith, entering the kingdom of God depends on a believing faith in the name of Jesus. Salvation is the way of grace from beginning to end. John writes, “The law was given through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ... Blessings come from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14-18). James says, “Show me your faith without your deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do” (James 2:18). James then continues, quoting Abraham as one whose faith was tested by his actions. He was in the act of sacrificing his only son of promise when God intervened with a substitute sacrifice (James 2:20-24). Jesus’ reply on the relationship of faith and good deeds was not to confuse his hearers with an either-or, but to show that the kingdom required both belief and lifestyle.

Christ’s kingdom is both a place to which he took his resurrected body into the Father’s presence, and the state of relationship between the Christ the King and his redeemed.

Entry to this spiritual kingdom is made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who trust Christ. By faith the believer becomes heir to Christ’s kingdom. To become an heir is not by natural birth but by being born again from above.

The Muslim believer in the Qur’an won’t know until death whether Allah has predestined him or her to the paradise of heaven or to the fires of hell. The Jew claims that heaven is his by his inheritance, whereas the Muslim claims that paradise is his because he has faithfully kept all the sharia laws of the Qur’an. Christians claim that they are the rightful heirs of the kingdom because they have confessed their sins, received forgiveness and yielded their whole life to Christ for his saving care. A person who is in Christ becomes evident from a changed lifestyle,

Entering the kingdom may be a sudden leap of faith as a result of reading the scriptures, or of receiving a revelation through a dream. This often happened on the twenty-seventh Night of Power in the Ramadan pilgrimage, as it did for Nabeel Qureshi and Ahmed Joktan, the son of a Meccan mufti.²

Jesus’ first four disciples were fisherman, followed by a tax collector named Matthew. When Jesus called them they each left their work and followed him, no doubt challenged by his life and words. They were not aware that he was the Son of God sent from the Father. At what stage during the next three years did they understand his message that the kingdom of God was near? We do not know. Even at the time of crucifixion the disciples still thought of him as teacher and prophet. It was only after the resurrection that they fully understood who Jesus was and why he came.

An example of entering the kingdom

A contemporary example of entering the kingdom as a process was Nilakanth Goreh (1825-96), a Maratta Brahmin from Benares, who became a Sanskrit scholar and earned the title of pandit. He first heard about Jesus from William Smith, a CMS missionary who was preaching in the streets of Benares and gave him a bible and John Muir’s *Examination of True Religion*, written in Sanskrit. For three years he agonized over the relationship of truth in Hinduism and Christianity. His conscience compelled him to accept Christianity. He was baptised, took the name Nehemiah, and became an effective evangelist among high-caste Hindus. His book, *Hindu Philosophical Systems: a Rational Refutation* has never been fully answered by the adherents of Hinduism.³

Another scholar who went through a similar agonizing pilgrimage to eventually become one of India's greatest Christian poets was Narayan Vaman Tilak (1861-1919)⁴ These two conversions contrast with the dream experiences of the two Muslims quoted, Nabeel Qureshi and Ahmed Joktan.

Factors in loving Muslims into the kingdom

actors that have led Muslims into the kingdom begin with a Spirit-led love by Christians for their Muslim neighbours. This dialogue begins with mutual trust, openness and a willingness to listen to criticisms of Christianity. In the case of Goreh, Mr Smith never argued with him but gave him the Bible to read. Later Goreh stated, "I wished to refuse it (the Bible) but he offered it so courteously that though I felt contempt for him and his book I could not refuse to take it."⁵

An important factor in Muslims entering the kingdom is a willingness to read the Injil (four gospels) and to compare them with the Qur'an. The Christian partner needs to be able to regularly read the Qur'an, be able to quote from it, and in love accept its truths. At least three quarters of the Qur'an are direct references from the Old Testament and the Gospels. Muslims accept that the prophet Isa was unique in the Qur'an and in moments of honesty recognise that he is more than a prophet and was sent from God to establish his kingdom on earth. It is important to limit the discussion to the Old Testament and the Gospels, as Muhammad never mentioned the writings of the Apostle Paul and other authors of the New Testament. For the Muslim inquirer who wants to know more about Isa, the Christian partner will be praying that the Holy Spirit will prompt Muslims to read the gospels in order to understand why Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and why he came to earth. The Christian will also give guidance to the seeker on how to face persecution from the family and community, and how to pray under such pressures. Only prayer to Christ and his Spirit will give the new believer the perseverance to continue on the way to life.

We are entering into a new period in our mission to Muslims. The United Bible Societies believe there are now about 40-100 million Christians in China and that every year 500,000 to 1 million people are embracing Jesus Christ as Saviour. Muslims are also turning to Christ in great numbers in the Muslim nations of Iran and Indonesia but since most live as secret believers, their numbers are known only to God. In other countries such as Laos, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and especially throughout the Middle East, the number of Christians is 2-3 % or much less.

Mission in today's suffering world is to be seen as the fulfilment of Jesus' appeal to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbour with the same love that believers have for themselves and for others.

To God be the glory!

Endnotes

Loving Muslims into the Kingdom of God

¹ <https://www.whyislam.org/the-complete-islamic-personality/>

² Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, finding Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2014), Dr Ahmed Joktan, *A Night of Power* (Auckland, Asia Pacific Discipleship Trust, 2021).

³ Bruce Nicholls, *Building Bridges from Asian Faiths to Jesus in the Gospels* (Oxford, Regnum, 2019), 30-33.

⁴ K R Shirsat, Narayan Vaman Tilak (Bombay, Bombay Tract and Book Society. 1979).

⁵ Nicholls, 31.

TRIBUTE



Vale Rev Dr Michelle Cook

On 1 November 2024, the Moderator of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church of Australia, Rev Tony Goodluck, notified people of the impending death of Michelle who was involved in a tragic accident on 30 October that left her with unrecoverable injuries. Her funeral service and service of thanksgiving took place at the Nightcliff Uniting Church in Darwin on 14 November.

She was a Deacon in the Uniting Church and Moderator-Elect for the Northern Synod. She was appointed to teach at Nungalinya in 2018 after serving communities at Weipa, along the Frontier Services' Cape York Patrol, and at Mapoo and Yalga Binbi. We think of her family, James, Zane and Marda, her parents and all who loved her.

She offered significant leadership in the Uniting Church, as a member of six Assemblies and served two terms on the Assembly Standing Committee together with many other roles.

Rev. Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, wrote as follows:

“She was a tireless friend and ally to the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and to First Nations peoples, advocating for their voices to be heard and respected, and for the rightful place of Congress within our Church. She was a champion of the Uniting Church’s revised Preamble and Covenant.”

A person of great integrity, she was not afraid to speak plainly of the truths we would need to face as we move towards justice and healing. She dreamed we would be a Church of 'deep listening'.

She was deeply committed to First Nations theological perspectives and insights and to shared learning. She enriched the ministries of many First Nations Christians as a passionate educator at Nungalinya College. She proclaimed the Gospel with passion and clarity, with words through which all could hear and come to know God's love for them.”

She contributed articles to this journal and was friend to many.

May she Rest in Peace.

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