



A First Peoples Heart

“ Our Vision:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, nurtured and sustained by God before colonisation, are celebrated at the very heart of what it means to be Australian. First Peoples' sovereignty is affirmed, First Peoples have a voice in the decision making of our country and are living out their right to self-determination. As First and Second Peoples, we walk together, creating socially just and culturally safe relationships, listening and learning from one another.

Our hopes:

- A constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to the Federal Government.
- A Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of:
 - » Agreement-making or treaty-making between governments and First Peoples
 - » Truth-telling about Australia's history, seeking justice, healing and reconciliation
- Self-determination that gives First Peoples full control over decisions impacting their lives and communities.
- Meaningful and effective, culturally-appropriate and research-based policies and programs to significantly reduce Indigenous incarceration.
- Significant and consistent resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled community health and wellbeing services, designed to achieve a closing of the gap in health, mental health and social outcomes.
- Adequate resourcing of remote communities.
- High rates of early childhood education, school attendance and completion among Indigenous students supported by sufficient professional resourcing and educational opportunities, no matter where a person lives.
- Indigenous languages to be preserved, taught and incorporated into civic functions. True bilingual education to become a reality for Indigenous communities where English is not a first language.
- Indigenous cultures to be understood and celebrated by all Australians.
- Support for Indigenous business and increased local employment opportunities in remote communities.

Witness from the Bible

- We begin from the starting point that all humans are made in the image of God and are thus to be equally respected, included and supported in society (**Genesis 1: 26-27**).
- The teaching of the prophets consistently links faithfulness to God with a willingness to care for those members of society who are on the margins or have been treated unjustly. See for example **Isaiah 58: 1 – 11; Amos 2: 6 – 7; 4: 1 – 5; 5: 10 – 15, 21 – 24**.
- Jesus' example of ministry and his teaching point us to a focus on showing kindness and compassion to those marginalised by society (**Luke 10: 25-37**). Jesus described his call to ministry as one which was bound up with proclaiming good news for the poor and oppressed (**Luke 4: 16 – 19**), and he taught that our response to those in need represents a response to Christ himself (**Matthew 25: 31 – 46**).
- The New Testament Epistles describe a community without distinctions (**Galatians 3: 28**) and give Christians the "ministry of reconciliation" (**2 Corinthians 5: 18**) and of pursuing peace with everyone (**Hebrews 12: 14**).
- In the light of these biblical principles, the Uniting Church sees that the single area within Australian society where there is the keenest need for reconciliation and peace-making, where people have been dispossessed and continue to be marginalised, where there is a need for respect and the recognition of the presence of God, is in our relationship and heart for the First Peoples of this country.

What the UCA has said

The Basis of Union (1971, 1992 Edition)

"God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation..."

Bicentennial Statement to the Nation (1988)

"Those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are the descendants of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who were Aboriginal people. In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal experience of violence and injustice."

“The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularised in the media, must cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation.”

“The integrity of our nation will be measured by action; by legislative action which honours the Aboriginal plea for justice, and by popular action by which the Australian people express their willingness to support Aboriginal Australians in the quest for justice and their struggle to reconstruct their society.

“As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in co-operation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together.”

The Covenant (1994)

At its 7th Assembly, the Uniting Church formally entered into a Covenant relationship with its Indigenous members, recognising and repenting for the Church’s complicity in the injustices perpetrated on Australia’s Indigenous community, and pledging to move forward with a shared future. Congress’ generous response to this statement, among other messages, called upon the broader Church to take up the mission of reconciliation.

Preamble to the Constitution (2009)

The 12th Assembly 2009 affirmed a new preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution which recognised the tragic history of dispossession and the decimation of the First Peoples together with our part as Church in this. Importantly, it recognised that God was in this land from the very beginning, in creation, and this Creator God was known by the First Peoples long before any invaders arrived, the Word was in Creation and is revealed in human form as Jesus Christ.

Recognising First Peoples as Sovereign, the 15th Assembly (2018)

The Assembly resolved “to affirm the First Peoples of Australia, the Aboriginal and Islander Peoples, are sovereign peoples in this land”. In recognising this fundamental truth, the UCA offered moral leadership to the nation. It affirmed sovereignty as described in the Statement from the Heart, as a “spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land...and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples”. Likewise it acknowledged that this sovereignty “has never

been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.”

Statement from the Heart (2017)

In August 2017, responding to the Statement from the Heart,¹ the National Executive of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) affirmed the work that supports the Statement from the Heart, in which Indigenous leaders asked for a voice to advise Parliament, and the creation of a commission to oversee Makarrata or treaty making.²

Subsequent to this, the UAICC National Conference resolved to invite the Assembly “to support work to progress the Uluru statement” and “endorse and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),³ including principles of self-determination”.

The State of the Nation

- Indigenous communities, both remote and urban, experience heightened levels of disadvantage. Indigenous Australians have a lower life expectancy and worse health, education and employment outcomes across the board than other Australians.⁴
- Proportionally, Australia’s Indigenous people are the most incarcerated people on the planet.⁵
- More Indigenous peoples have experienced racial prejudice in the last 6 months, than the general community, with 43% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander respondents having suffered at least one form of such racism.⁶
- Australians widely agree Indigenous people hold a unique and important place in the national identity.⁷

Key Actions:

1. Provide First Peoples with a Voice into Federal Government enshrined in the Australian constitution.
2. Recognise the sovereignty of First Peoples and establish a commission for treaty making, truth telling, justice and reconciliation.

Discussion Starters or Questions for Candidates

You may like to ask one or more of the following questions in a small group discussion or select one or more to put to a candidate before the election.

1. Does your party have a Reconciliation Action Plan, and what are the key points?
2. Have you read the Statement from the Heart? How do you feel about giving First Peoples a formal voice into government?
3. What is your position regarding understanding First Peoples as sovereign in this land and the implications for that?
4. What do you think should be done to address Indigenous disadvantage in terms of life expectancy, health and education for First Peoples?
5. What do you think should be done to address Indigenous incarceration rates in Australia?
6. What are you doing, or what might you do to further reconciliation in your own community?

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Thanks go to...

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See also

<https://nswact.uca.org.au/social-justice/the-social-justice-forum/>

<http://unitingearthweb.org.au/>

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Uniting Church members are encouraged to visit the websites of all the above groups to further explore the issues and questions that arise as we consider what it means to live and act justly.