



Transforming Worship



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY

TOWARDS INTENTIONALLY ANTI-RACIST WORSHIP

By Rev. Radhika Sukumar-White

In the wake of massive protests in the US, sparked by the killing of George Floyd, social media has erupted with calls for people to be not just “not racist”, but to actively be **anti-racist**, in word and action – to actively and intentionally confront racial inequities.

The Uniting Church exists as a uniquely Australian Church, so we have the opportunity to be leaders in our own country in being an intentionally anti-racist faith movement. Our President, Dr Deidre Palmer and Interim Chairperson of UAICC, Pastor Mark Kickett have recently [written a Pastoral Letter](#), urging Australians to focus their attention on racism in our own country:

Here are some things to think about for UCA congregations to seek to be intentionally anti-racist in worship. While this was written with predominantly white congregations in mind, this is important work for all worshipping communities – the work of de-colonising our practises, and taking steps to live out anti-racism.

Begin every gathering - worship, meetings, small groups, youth groups, everything – with an Acknowledgement of Country. And mean it.

Christian worship is not simply an hour of refuge from the world. Rather, we worship our God in real space and time, on real ground, surrounded by other real people all around our country and world. In our worship, we always confess our brokenness and sin, on our own behalf and on behalf of all humanity. We also always pray for the world and offer our financial gifts for the work of the Kingdom. We consistently do these practices because we believe in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, who ushers forth the Reign of God. Our role as Christians is to work towards that Reign. These prayers and practices re-align us, each week, towards that role.

The Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of any church gathering is a key way to exist as an Australian church, keeping alive the memory of conquest and survival. When we acknowledge country, we are invited to challenge the dominant Australian stories of peaceful settlement, *terra nullius*, and White Australia. We acknowledge that we worship on land that God lovingly created, which was cared for by Aboriginal people for many, many years before us, and which ultimately belongs to God, not us. The Acknowledgement of Country is a way of giving back to First Peoples their rightful place in society, paying them respect as First Peoples (which has often been denied) and recognising their ongoing connection to land. The Uniting Church Assembly has put out a helpful longer reflection on Acknowledgement of First Peoples. [Download here:](#)

The Acknowledgement of Country is not about sitting forever in a puddle of guilt. Acknowledging country is akin to a prayer that God will heal wounds, inspire us to work for justice, and bring forth an era of harmony and reconciliation. Our faith in Jesus teaches us that one day, this will become a reality. After all, Christ's ministry was of reconciliation.

Acknowledging country – not just reciting words, but really acknowledging and paying respects to traditional custodians – at the beginning of any church gathering is about placing us in a posture of humility, respect, and connection with the Australian story.

TO DO:

- 1) Do some research on the traditional custodians of the land where your church building is.
- 2) If there is a surviving community of First Peoples there, try and engage with them, and build a relationship.
- 3) Write an Acknowledgement of Country, and share it with all groups associated with your church to use.

Look at your worship space. Who sits where, and why? How does the space embody intentional Christian community?

Many of our church sanctuaries are set up in a Euro-centric manner: straight lines of pews filled with listeners gaining knowledge from the knowledge-transmitter – the minister. In some other cultures, including Indigenous cultures, learning happens in circles, such as around a campfire or mat, where everyone can see everyone else, and learning happens communally.

Have a look at your worship space. Is there something about it that says: if you're new, or look different to us, sit in this particular section? How can your architecture and set up promote a real sense of community and communal learning? Could you move things around so that people can see each other in worship, rather than the backs of people's heads?

And if you think about the people who are invited to take part in leading worship, do they all look the same? Part of the 'built-in' racism which can exist is that when choosing people, we subconsciously tend to preference people who look like us or come from similar cultural backgrounds. It is important to specifically think about whether we are enabling a diversity of people to be seen and to be involved. It's particularly important to actively amplify CALD voices in worship – preachers, liturgists, musicians, testimony providers, etc. There is a challenge involved here: for there to be space for CALD people to speak and lead in worship, others will need to stop talking and move out of the way.

TO DO:

- 1) Spend some time in your worship space looking at where things are situated. Play around with the space, and sit in different spaces.
- 2) Take a look at your worship roster, and see if a particular culture is favoured. Intentionally seek out people from other cultures in your community, build relationship, and invite them to use their gifts and skills in worship.

Learn about different communication styles in different cultures.

Here are some examples.

In some cultures, looking someone in the eye is considered rude, as is standing face to face with someone. Encourage your communities to grow in awareness of silences, body language and personal space.

Some cultures have different “comfort zones”. Help your people learn differences in the ways people supplement their words with body language.

Some cultures rely far less on verbal communication and more on the context of non-verbal actions and environmental settings to convey meaning. For others, what they say is what they mean.

In some cultures, people will feel uncomfortable to speak if there are others of higher status or age in attendance, or people from some cultures may not feel able to volunteer a comment or to answer a question unless specifically invited to do so.

What is polite and normative in some cultures might be considered rude in others.

This stuff is really important, both for the worship service, and for community time around it, e.g. morning tea.

TO DO:

- 1) Practise, practise, practise! Have some practise conversations over an imaginary morning tea, taking into account the points above.

Beware of language in music that may alienate CALD (Culturally And Linguistically Diverse) people.

Some of the Church’s greatest music comes from European composers and poets – not all, but some. These are, of course, to be respected and held within our tradition. However, some of the language in worship music may be alienating or even triggering for people from non-Anglo backgrounds. Imagine what it might be like to hear lyrics that talk about washing our dirty sins away so we can be pure and white. It is said that we sing our theology, so be careful in picking worship music.

TO DO:

- 1) Look at your song list, and have a look at the lyrics (whether in English or a different language). What does a particular song say to your community about who God is and who they are called to be? Is there problematic language that can be slightly altered? Is there problematic theology?

Don’t assume everyone speaks the same language.

It may be that people from CALD backgrounds in your communities speak English, but they may not speak Australian English, or understand Australian humour or idioms. Or, it may be that some may not understand “church words” we use regularly in worship.

Encourage your worship leaders to briefly explain each part of the liturgy before it begins, e.g. “we come now to our Prayer of Confession, where we take time to reflect on when we have hurt ourselves, others, the world, and God, and we are assured of God’s grace and forgiveness.” Yes, this may feel repetitive and redundant, but how else will people learn?

You may also like to provide written copies of sermons for people to take home, so that people with English as a Second Language can go through it more slowly than it is presented.

On the other hand, it is good to deliberately model worship which is not all just in one, dominant language. Let the liturgy be multi-lingual, and have those who have been used to the dominant language in worship learn patience and humility in following along with a provided translation, or just listening to worship in another language and joining in with the tone, inflection and emotions shown.

TO DO:

- 1) Have a group attend a worship service in a foreign language, and reflect on the experience afterwards.
- 2) Talk through your normal Order of Service from the perspective of someone who might not be fluent in the language it is in. What things might stump or confuse that person?
- 3) Invite those from diverse language groups to offer things into worship in the non-dominant language.

Preachers: read Feminist, Womanist, Liberation, Black, Indigenous and other Post-Colonial commentaries in your preparation.

Again, some of the greatest theological resources have come from Europe and America. It takes intention to choose to read and learn from less common voices. There are plenty of fantastic resources out there, written by people of non-Anglo backgrounds, who can open our eyes to fresh and new ways to explore Scripture and discipleship.

Another significant aspect to working against racism is the fundamental acknowledgment that there is not just one theology plus ‘add-ons’ from different perspectives. **All** theology comes from a perspective and it is important to acknowledge this and explicitly name the perspectives embodied in ‘traditional’ or ‘classical’ theological works. Diversity is enhanced when we recognise that the Christian tradition encompasses multiple theologies and always has! The idea that there is one ‘correct’ theology (“Ours!”) has regularly been a tool of colonial oppression.

TO DO:

- 1) Talk to theological college lecturers and libraries, and seek out resources that will expand your and your congregation’s horizons.

- 2) Keep up the theological learning in your communities; no one is beyond learning!
Create safe spaces to critique, pull apart and rebuild theology.

Remember what worship is meant to be.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of perfectionism in worship. But remember, God does not demand perfection, or even success. God demands faithfulness. If our worship service is ultra-smooth, musically beautiful, and right on 1 hour long, but lacks heart and community and diversity – it is but a clanging cymbal. Let the liturgy be a little messy, so that it can really be Liturgy – the Work of the People. Especially when confronted by racial injustices, inequities and violence in our world, don't be afraid to lament in worship, or to offer prayers that might make those in the majority uncomfortable.

The vision before us all is of a community of God whose diversity enables a better mirroring of the rich, transcendent diversity of God, and whose worship looks forward to the heavenly picture of “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea”, those from “every tribe and language and people and nation” joining together in the eternal hymn of praise. (Rev 5: 9, 13).

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