



A First Peoples Heart

“ Our Vision:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, nurtured and sustained by God before invasion, 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

- Constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to Federal Parliament.
- A Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of:
 - » Agreement-making or treaty-making between governments and First Nations
 - » Truth-telling about Australia's history, seeking justice, healing and reconciliation
- Self-determination that gives First Nations full control over decisions impacting their lives, communities, Country and cultural sites.
- Meaningful, effective, culturally-appropriate and research-based policies and programs to significantly reduce incarceration of First Peoples.
- 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 First Nations students supported by sufficient professional resourcing and educational opportunities, no matter where a person lives.
- First Nations languages to be preserved, taught and incorporated into civic functions. True bilingual education to become a reality for First Peoples where English is not a first language.
- First Nations cultures to be understood and celebrated by all people in Australia.
- Support for First Peoples business and increased local employment opportunities in remote communities.
- National policy is measured against the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- Recognition of stolen generations and the ongoing impacts of trauma on First Nations, families and 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 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 **John 10:10** Jesus spoke of his coming to bring abundant life for all.

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 (sic). In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people (sic) in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines (sic) have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal (sic) 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 (sic) society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines (sic) within the Australian nation."

"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 (sic) and newer Australians have determined to stand together."

The Covenant (1994)

At its 7th Assembly, the Uniting Church formally entered into a binding Covenant relationship with its Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) members, recognising and repenting for the Church's complicity in the injustices perpetrated on Australia's

First Peoples, and pledging to move forward with a shared future. UAICC's 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 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 First Peoples long before any invaders arrived. The Word was in Creation and is revealed in human form as Jesus Christ.

Statement from the Heart (2017)

In August 2017, responding to the Statement from the Heart², the National Executive of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) affirmed the work that supports the Statement from the Heart, in which First Nations leaders asked for a voice to advise Parliament, and the creation of a commission to oversee Makarrata or treaty making³. Subsequent to this, the UAICC National Conference resolved to invite the Assembly "to support work to progress the Uluru statement (sic)" and "endorse and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)⁴, including principles of self-determination".

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."

The State of the Nation

- First Peoples have given us the Statement from the Heart as the basis for reconciliation, but governments have not followed their lead.
- First Peoples communities, whether remote, regional or urban, experience heightened levels of disadvantage. First Peoples in Australia have a lower life expectancy and worse health, education and employment outcomes across the board than other people in Australia⁵.
- Proportionally, Australia's First Peoples are the most incarcerated people on the planet⁶. First Peoples comprise 30 per cent of the adult prison population⁷. Even more distressingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth constitute 6 per cent of the total youth population but represent just under half of those in youth detention across the country⁸.
- People in Australia were shocked at the recent desecration and destruction of the ancient First Nation historical site, Juukan Gorge, in WA. There is a lack of adequate legislative protection of such sites.
- Stolen Generations survivors and their families continue to carry trauma and were over-represented as victims in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Key actions:

1. Constitutional change to enshrine a First Nations Voice into Federal Parliament.
2. Recognise the sovereignty of First Nations and establish a commission for treaty making, truth telling, justice and reconciliation.
3. Provide sufficient funding to achieve the Closing the Gap targets, prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations to deliver services wherever possible.
4. Encourage and model trauma informed practice across the community.

Discussion starters

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 MPs or community leaders.

1. Does your party or organisation 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 Nations a formal voice into Federal Parliament?
3. What is your position regarding understanding First Nations as sovereign in this land and the implications of that?
4. What do you think should be done to address First Nations disadvantage in terms of life expectancy, health and education?
5. What do you think should be done to address First Nations incarceration rates in Australia? What is your position on raising the age of criminal responsibility in all jurisdictions to 14 years?
6. What are you doing, or what might you do to further justice for First Peoples in your own community?
7. How are we recognising trauma and implementing trauma informed practice in our community?

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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.