

## **University of Divinity's Raising Our Tribal Voice for Justice Conference**

### **Church Leaders Respond to the Voice of the Indigenous Theologians**

Response from Uniting Church in Australia President Rev Sharon Hollis: Session 11, Thursday 8 February 2024

My name is Sharon Hollis and I'm the President of the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly. I acknowledge that this is the unceded land of the Wurunjuri people of the Woivurrung language and I pay my respects to their elders, past and present and to their descendants. I give thanks for their continuous custodianship and care of all that is in this country, for their strength of their culture that they have maintained since beginning of creation. I acknowledge all First Peoples who are present here with us today. I honour you for your cultural knowledge and for your willingness to share that with us in this conference. I particularly want to acknowledge the presence of members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Many of them have been my teachers, my correctors, my friends and my guides.

I want to say thank you to all of those who have organised this conference. For your commitment to see this conference come to fruit, for your capacity to endure through the trials and tribulations that goes with organising any conference. Thank you for keeping the course and for inviting us into this space. And particularly to Professor Anne Patel Grey, to the Rev Canon Dr Garry Deverell, of the School of Indigenous Studies. We are in your debt.

One of the strange things about the Uniting Church is, I could tell you a lot and I could tell you very little. We work in Councils - each of which has its own responsibilities. There are things that as a Uniting Church we are seeking to do. To own the history of the parts of the Church that came into union in 1977, our predecessor denominations. There are things we are doing to seek to create structures where Indigenous People can have more self-determination. But I know that whatever we are doing is not enough.

I am conscious particularly that there is a Covenant between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Assembly. An agreement making document that speaks of evil, and speaks of our sin, and speaks of our desire to lament, and repent, and to do more.

When I'm in Sydney, I make sure every time I go there I visit and sit with the Covenanting painting. Not to make myself feel better but because I know that we have failed to honour that Covenant. We have not been true partners in that agreement making. We have said that before and still we do not do better. I lament and confess that we are not an honourable partner yet in that Covenant and I can't commit the whole Uniting Church to being an honourable partner, but I commit as the President of the Assembly to keep speaking this truth and keep calling us to do better.

You all liked it when John said it might be better to listen than to speak and I've been thinking over these days, how does one discern when to speak - and when to listen. It is absolutely necessary and essential for those of us who are Second Peoples to be in a posture of deep listening. But I know as somebody who exercises institutional responsibility, I also must at points speak. I must call out the racism that is in my own church and in my own heart. And if we doubt it, look at the response to the referendum. Despite deep encouragement from the leaders of my church, people in my own church voted no.

So I must speak.

As I speak though, I am conscious that within my own culture is a voraciousness: to own, to control, to categorise and to dominate. To take and to use for our own ends. And so, in my speaking, and in my listening, I am seeking to try and discern that part of me that is colonised and will always be colonised, and to try as best as I can - to not speak out of that space. It is a risk, in inviting people like me into a conference like this, that we will simply take what we are given and try to control it. Try to own it. Try to use it for our own ends. So let us hold each other to account for that.

I'm asking every person who is a member of the Uniting Church, who is Second Peoples to be willing to have those accountability conversations with each other. I can't do this on my own, but we can do it together.

I need to work at not seeking a margin to avoid my own - or my own denomination's - culpability, and responsibility.

In my group yesterday, we were told the story of a plant that can be used to make bread - but you have to know how to use it. It's a plant that if you just take and eat it, it's poisonous. But if you prepare it, if you pound it, the poison leeches out. I have felt some pounding these days. And that is good for me in the long run.

We need to do some of that pounding ourselves as Second Peoples. To sit together and learn our history and have the hard conversations. And I'd always rely on First Peoples to do that work for us.

So the commitment I make is to take this conversation into my work. To advocate for the need for Indigenous spirituality and theology: in our academies, in our congregations, in our councils, in our agencies and in our schools.

I commit to examining my own soul and reflecting on what I have heard here.

What I want to do now is ask every member of the Uniting Church who is here today, who is a Second Person, to stand. Uniting Church members, I want you to look at each other. I ask you to join me in listening, in discerning, in challenging, in confessing, in lamenting and in holding each other accountable.

To all First Nations People who are here - look at us and don't let us off the hook.

Thank you.