



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NEWCASTLE**  
AUSTRALIA

## 2014 Morpeth Lecture

**The Right Reverend Gregory Thompson**

**Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Newcastle**

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### **Two-Faced, Two Ways**

History shows relationships with First Australians have been two-faced. There is another way.

What sort of relationship do we all want and need with the First Australians? How can we heal together, and progress from an infantile relationship to one more positive?

The Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle, The Right Reverend Greg Thompson, spent seven years as Bishop of the Northern Territory, and previously 10 years working in country and parish ministries in the 'top end'.

In the Morpeth Lecture Bishop Greg will reflect on his experiences in the Territory as he explores the concepts of 'closing the gap' and reconciliation for First Australians.

He argues that leadership isn't always about knowing the answers, but about working together to find a common pathway and move forward.

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I wish to acknowledge the country of the Awabakal and Worimi people, the land on which our Diocese exists. I offer my respect to the custodians of this land, their courage and strength. The Awabakal and Worimi peoples are recognised as the traditional custodians of this area, Newcastle. The Awabakal and Worimi traded with neighbouring groups, coming together for corroborees, ceremonies and feasting. As many as 100 campsites lined the Hunter coastline prior to European settlement.

I give my commitment to pray and work for reconciliation which must be founded on honesty, listening and sharing in the language of the First Australians of this country. I return to this land from the Northern Territory. The Hunter, is where my great great grandfather arrived in 1829 to the Morpeth area, a great grandfather - a Wallsend colliery manager in the 1890's, a grandfather in the 1900's as a Newcastle tram driver, and my father, a railwayman here and in the Upper Hunter and most importantly it is the country of the Awabakal and Worimi people and others for countless generations who cared and looked after this land.

I now find myself asking what sort of relationship do we want with First Australians, both the church and Australia in general. How do we do this? How do we repair the past traumas together, and move from two-faced relationships where we say and intend one thing yet often do another? How do we build on trust and confidence to work at two-way listening and learning from one another as adults? How can we walk together in this great country and recognise one another no longer as strangers but friends.

Whilst Bishop of the Northern Territory, I experienced the timelessness of the landscape in the Northern Territory which takes the breath away, and the sense of a holy wild place was very much the experience even though it is a well-travelled destination.

In the Northern Territory where the church can be a large open shed or a gathering on the beach, the sand of God got into my shoes. I was changed not just by the simplicity or the remarkable physical landscape but the people's faith, resilience and fragility, hopefulness and daily trust in a loving Creator. The sand of God which was picked up in my shoes was carried to other communities and to my home, and reminded me to be true to First Australians and to the loving God who says "Anyone who welcomes one of these, welcomes me."

My experiences have led me to reflect on the contrasting ways we can have relationships with First Australians. I remember sitting at a fire among many fires under a starlit sky in the sand dunes of Umbakumba Groote Eylandt and hearing the singing, feeling the smoke wash over me with warmth, sharing stories and challenges, and enjoying a billy tea and damper. As a newcomer I was given a welcome, hearing conversations in Anindilyakwa and English and then I was invited to speak to the scattered groups around fires. I was learning about this world and they were listening for who I was not just what my words were saying. Then after singing a chair was placed in the centre on the sand between the fires, and with people who were sick and unwell coming forward to be seated each in turn and prayed for healing – the elders and I standing together in the firelight and smoke seeking a healing for the community. What a privilege to be known and to share together to encourage and strengthen one another.

Yet too often my encounters with non Indigenous policies and practices subvert the spoken intentions of helping and building partnerships. Much of the anger within the Aboriginal community of the NT is primarily directed at the paternalistic and non-consultative manner with which the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention was imposed in 2007:

[transcribed from a member of the community at a Yuendumu public meeting] *They didn't even sit down with us. Nothing. You call this a consultation? No, no, no. I'm saying they called it a consultation before they put it. They had their thing in their heads. In our minds we always say: "Come down from your bloody throne! And sit down and talk with us! Come down from your cloud number nine and sit down with us." And you know, in here [picking up pamphlet from the ground where he'd thrown it and waving it] there's nothing in here about culture, nothing about Law, no land, nothing! In here, there's no Law, no Law, no Law, no language and respect of the Indigenous people! You gotta realize their ideas ... Hear our lips: NO! This is not a proper consultation. This consultation is nothing [cited in Harris & McKenna 2011: 15]*

Another community member said:

[transcribed from a member of the community at the Yuendumu consultation] *when you guys started with the Intervention, the same things that we heard, "you are going to be heard." That never, never, never happened. It just went in here [pointing to the right ear] here [pointing to the left ear] and blew it out, the wind blew it out [cited in Harris & McKenna 2011: 13]*

A two faced relationship happens when we forget painful history or we refuse to concede that it happened or because our leadership is shaped by another agenda than that of healthy relationship. We continue to forget those who made mistakes before us, and we do not seem to learn from experience in working cross culturally, particularly when there have been generational interventions and painful suffering. The NT Intervention, the Closing the Gap, and the more recent Stronger Futures have ancestors in government policy. I name these for you.

The first era we might call Colonisation or Invasion policies commencing in 1788 depending on whether you believe that this involved military campaigns. If the British Regiments who served in the colony recognise in their regimental honors lists in the UK their Australian military actions then it is hard to refute military occupation and colonial wars and the suppression and removal of First peoples from their land.

The first European to explore the Hunter was Lieutenant John Shortland in 1797. His discovery of the area was largely accidental; as he searched for escaped convicts. The penal settlement in Newcastle led to the seizure of the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Hunter Valley districts. These settlements were the frontlines in what was, to all intents and purposes, a strategic and military invasion of Aboriginal land.

Newcastle gained a reputation as a "hellhole" as it was a place where the most dangerous convicts were sent as harsh punishment for their crimes. Newcastle was notorious as a place of deprivation and hardship, characterised by the punishing routines of coal mining, lime-burning, timber-cutting and public works programs endured by the convicts.

It was not an environment capable of creating friendship and respect toward local Aboriginal society, nor was it a model of civilised society likely to make itself appealing to First Australians. The intercultural exchanges however were diverse, fluid and ambivalent — some involved violence but there was also cooperation, companionship and sharing of knowledge.

Many disturbances and instances of violence occurred from the decision to use First Australians to track and assist in the capture of escaped convicts. The skills of First Australians were used for the colonial's benefit whilst invading their lands, marginalising First Australians in their own country.

Newcastle remained a penal settlement until 1822. After this ended, a steady flow of free settlers poured into the area seeing an increase in the violence and dispossession that occurred for First Australians. During the 1800s Aboriginal peoples across NSW bore the brunt of European invasion, and their languages were an early casualty, with the active suppression of languages and the emergence of English as the common language.

In February 1825 Lancelot Threlkeld (Lutheran missionary who first translated Luke's Gospel into Awabakal) wrote from his Aboriginal mission on Lake Macquarie that in some parts of the colony there was 'quite a hostile feeling against the Blacks. And those who ought to be their champions are silent on the subject' (1825 [1974]: 178). In September 1826 he wrote about the violence which was occurring in the Upper Hunter: 'Many will be shot and if the English will be murdered in retaliation, their land is taken from them, their food destroyed, and they are left to perish or driven upon hostile tribes where death awaits them there'. He referred to the violence occurring in the Upper Hunter at the time as 'this war' (1826 [1974]: 213–14). (Cited in *On Visiting Gundy* by Helen Brayshaw p228).

The next era we might call Protection commencing in the 1830's to the 1960's when disease, violence and dysfunction led to pressure to protect a supposed 'doomed race'. Reserves, missions and institutions were established to provide protection. In the 1830s the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Lower Hunter declined markedly, and mortalities in a smallpox epidemic from 1829 to 1831 may have exceeded 30 percent of the Aboriginal population.

In this era of protection there continued significant displacement for First Australians. At Gundy near Scone, an Aboriginal community existed on the site chosen for a proposed church building. A former resident of Gundy, Wilfred Green (1890–1976), was told that the Aboriginal people refused to vacate their village camp when the site was selected in 1867 for the church (Gray 1978: 68). According to Wilfred Green, the church people made use of their knowledge of Aboriginal customs and arranged to have the body of a recently deceased Aboriginal person brought into the camp from higher up the river. The Gundy tribe left at once, forming a new camp near the foot of Willis's Hill, on the Belltrees road. (Cited in *On Visiting Gundy* by Helen Brayshaw p231).

This era overlapped with that of Assimilation policies from the early 1900's as Indigenous peoples and migrants were expected to give up their own heritage and adopt the culture of the majority. This included the removal of Indigenous children in an effort to both protect and assimilate First Australians.

The emergence of the era Self Determination policies in the 1960's recognised that people groups had their own distinctive cultures, rights to their land and sea, and national recognition through the 1967 referendum and with local governance in former missions and reserves. In this time there was growing recognition of the conditions of First Australians as with the "Little Children are Sacred' Report 2007" said to be the catalyst for the emergency intervention in the NT.

After all these interventions we came to hear with expectancy and hopefulness that the National Apology to the Stolen Generation delivered by PM Rudd in 2008 would be another watershed for reconciliation and healing to our national psyche. However what we do after we say 'sorry' will reveal whether there is substance to our symbolic commitments.

Will we have a new season of Recognition with Relationship with an ongoing two way conversation between First Australians and later-comers? One that seeks an honest dialogue about our past and establishes a better future founded on trust and mutual respect. Without true acknowledgement of the past, reconciliation and building relationships with First Australians, our nation will continue to be two faced, patronising and dismissive of friendships with First Australians.

In early 2008 I called in on the new Government Business Manager in a remote Arnhemland coastal community sent there by the NTER. In her newly founded office near the water edge in a flood prone area, she called me to look out her office window. "Look there" she pointed. She described how she was now very anxious about how she was going to be treated. The subcontractors without understanding or genuine conversation with elders had dug a pit toilet in a ceremonial ground. She was now worried about her future and it was only days into the intervention in that community. The head of the NTER then apologized through the media about this event as that of cultural misunderstanding – no mention of offence against the religious life of a small community. I introduced the GBM to the local Aboriginal church leaders who said she is not to worry. They gave her another chance to relate to this community with respect.

We have a long history of incompetent communication practices that avoid taking time to listen to elders. In a response to an anthropologist's discussion on how Aboriginal people regard non Aboriginal people, an Aboriginal Kimberley woman reiterated several times to her that Aboriginal people always talk about what is real. She went on to say that Aboriginal men think that white men are children because they do not always do so, and concluded 'White men are liars'. (Cited in 'White men are liars' Margaret S Bain SIL Darwin 2005 p10)

Honesty gives rise to trust, establishes consistency, allowing the other person to rely on what you say as carrying true meaning. Most importantly of all, honesty is about respect and valuing the dignity of the other person. It means working with the talent and skills of people who will need to be the leadership for their community.

[transcribed from a speech by a member of the community at a Darwin public meeting] *Engage. First engage. Properly engage – not information sessions, not going out there already having the decisions already made, but truly engaging people to be part of the decision making. If they're part of the decision-making, and they make the decisions about their kids, then you're going to have more buy-in* (cited in Harris & McKenna 2011: 7)

Changes in policy, in addressing problems created by the past, do not erase the past. In NSW the history of forced resettlement on reserves, the placing of many thousands of children in institutions, and the loss of land and culture are evident in the generational disadvantages experienced by many First Australians today.

First Australians generally experience lower standards of health, education, employment and housing than non Indigenous population. The life expectancy of Indigenous people in NSW is around 10 years lower than that of the Australian population. First Australians are three times more likely to be unemployed or homeless than that of the non-Indigenous population.

27% of First Australians aged 15 years and over reported experiencing discrimination recently. Discrimination is higher among specific groups within the First Australians, including those removed from their families, the unemployed and people with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

First Australians are over- represented in the criminal justice system. In New South Wales, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people make up just 2.2% of the general population, but over half of the detention population. They are 28 times more likely to be placed in juvenile detention than non-Indigenous young people.

Recently I visited Cessnock Correctional Centre for NAIDOC celebrations and BBQ. The gathering of a large number of young Indigenous inmates who are talented and engaging underscored the sheer waste of gifts and relationships behind bars. Three Indigenous young people visiting the Centre, the grandchildren of the Indigenous chaplain there, marched in army cadet uniforms to raise the Aboriginal flag to remember the Indigenous service personnel who have served this nation in war. A young Indigenous father sat with me over lunch telling me of his life story. Articulate, studied and a preparedness to work sees him inside after 6 months in an institution without education or training pathways. He saves his money to buy art paper and pens to draw. He tells me that he has not seen his children for a number of years. He says he is close to God inside. He has another two years to serve. What will be his part in our relationship future as a nation? How has this policy of incarceration enabled a pathway for a healthy future? What do genuine policies of delivering justice look like?

How we shape policy and practice to address the generational disadvantages ought to be based on the participation by the communities involved.

[transcribed from a speech by a member of the community at the Galiwin'ku community meeting] *We can make mistakes, Everybody makes mistakes. Go through the teething problem you make mistakes. But end of the day you got control. We want Yolŋu control school. Where Yolŋu are being part of the problem, ah part of the answers, problem solving. Yolŋu working together not just Balanda making the decisions all the time, you know, these are the concerns that really stir up many of our people you know?* (cited in Harris & McKenna 2011: 20)

As in the experience of the NT, any policy that moves towards genuine improvement of circumstances must be taken in genuine consultation with the Aboriginal eldership. The NTER experience is telling, government policies must not be driven by electoral attractiveness, and must be primarily informed by genuine engagement with local Aboriginal leadership. Researcher on the achievements and missed opportunities of the NT Intervention Jane Hunt in 2010 wrote ;

The research conclusion is robust: the legitimacy must be 'two-way'. It must include forms of decision making, representation, accountability and authority that reflect contemporary Indigenous views concerning 'proper' relationships, forms of authority and cultural geographies in their groups and regions. But at the same time, Indigenous governance arrangements must be seen as legitimate in the eyes of governments. Cultural legitimacy in itself will not suffice. There must also be strong practical governance capacity on the ground to ensure that important things get done (Missed Opportunity - Janet Hunt 2010: 425)

When the NTER commenced in June 2007, the Churches in the NT were largely ignored. We experienced what First Australians seem to always experience – the government subverted and ignored any voices that contradicted the media message. As the Roman Catholic Bishop of Darwin wrote in his letter to the Minister Jenny Macklin, the government officials on the ground were either ‘arrogant or ignorant’ of the history of remote communities. The Uniting Church, Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches made submissions to Government and Opposition on the NTER, including personal representation to Labor Cabinet meeting the Hon Jenny Macklin and the Liberal Opposition spokesman to Indigenous Affairs the Hon Tony Abbott. We were patronised even though each of these churches had over 100 years each of presence in the NT delivering a major proportion of education and community services. We were told that we didn’t know what was really happening even though there are significant numbers of Christian Aboriginal people leading churches in remote communities. All of this revealed the fragile methodology of the Federal Government in undertaking the NT Intervention and its subsequent ‘children’, the policies of Closing the Gap and Stronger Futures.

On the 16 July 2009 I wrote to Mr Taryn Lesser Officer of the High Commissioner for the UN on Indigenous Peoples;

*The NT emergency response has brought multiple layers of bureaucracy to scrutinise the building of a toilet but it cannot manage the drinking or the violence in communities.*

*At Oenpelli 400km east of Darwin on the edge of Kakadu, we sought last year to obtain govt permission to build toilets next to our church which holds regular funerals for the community. We have had a builder and we can fund the project of \$50,000 by the community. Traditional Owners have wanted this done for sometime but we received permission in June 09, (some 9 months later).*

*We will hold an ordination service on 24 August at Oenpelli for traditional elder Lois Namanyilk who alongside other women try to lead their people. It is one community which the NT Emergency Response legislation failed to prohibit the sale of alcohol - why, you need to ask government officials.*

*I will do the ordination service on the day the 'wet canteen' is not opened, because of the regular patterns of violence that follows drinking sessions.*

*The failure to address these basic community concerns alongside the coercive policies of government compounds the deep sense that our governments do not want to engage in effective partnerships - with churches, NGO's, or local leadership. Much has to do with incompetence, the underlying prejudice towards First Australians and a failure to build lasting friendships and alliances with communities.*

In many of our relationships with First Australians, there's been a failure to have a two-way process. Has it been any better with policy and practice by the churches and missions in building relationships of trust and partnership?

Historically, missionaries were sent to Aboriginal missions to preach the Gospel, to protect from the ills of Western society, but also for bringing about social change. Captive to their own era of values and beliefs missionaries often conformed to government policies and suppressed cultural practices and first languages. They accepted and participated in the government policy of removal of children from their communities. They exercised gate keeping roles to these communities long after it was needed or asked for.

Early missionaries were told that they were naturally in a position of authority over First Australians regarded as a 'child race'. They were required to change Indigenous culture and lifestyle from itinerant hunter-gatherers to settled subsistent-plot farmers. For as long as the missionaries maintained a superior social distance from which they could judge and criticise First Australian's culture and lifestyle, then they placed a stumbling block in front of the very people whom they wanted to respond positively to the gospel.

This was a time when the Church had a view of the Gospel that ignored God's presence in cultures and beliefs other than her own. Our failure to dialogue with the religious mindset and framework of the First Australians were lost opportunities, not only to be bearers of the good news, but to grow an Australian theology grounded in the earth and spirit of this place rather than of Europe. The Australian Church by and large remains in its mindset a European mission rather than a church with its roots deeply in local soil.

However, there have been extraordinary service given to Indigenous peoples by missionary and churchworkers, many of them serving in remote communities for more than 30 years at a time. From the 1960's an intensive desire to learn and record Aboriginal languages by church workers was evident in the NT. Translating with local speakers and publishing Indigenous language bibles and resources provided an enduring record of languages that carry the culture and identity of their speakers and assist in passing on Indigenous literacy in first language. Missionaries delivered medical services, education, self-supporting gardens and farms, basic employment and trade skills and entered into long term friendships still remembered in communities.

In the wake of the NT Intervention in remote communities, senior Aboriginal leader in Arnhemland, the late Galarrwuy Yunupingu, has said that they were better off under mission rule. Abuse was low, they felt protected. (*The Age*, Melbourne, March 27 2008, page 1).

The colonising thinking of missionaries is still found widely in contemporary church circles and in particular in mission agencies who wish to exercise control over recipients via their donations and commissioned staff. The inability for a missionary or government agency to share its decision-making with local leadership, to refuse to enter into a learning practice out of the experiences of local workers and to foster helplessness through periodic short term support is a hand brake on the development of community leadership.

In 2009 I called together in Darwin a meeting with Mission agencies and their CEO's along with Aboriginal leadership to consider how we might work together with Indigenous leaders to further genuine partnership. They heard firsthand from Indigenous ministers of the very difficult circumstances of their communities in providing stable leadership with healthy change. Yet no change to methodology or funding or policy emerged from that watershed event.

Colonising relationships are marked by people who wish to control decisions and transplant their cultures upon another regarded as a weaker recipient. These mission bodies seem centred on our accountability to their agenda and on how they might raise their funds to their donor base using our story.

There are organisations that are forging better approaches. For example Samaritans, a local Anglican community service organisation, has listened and sought to recognise and relate in true partnership with First Australians. Samaritans has taken the stance of believing that these services are most effective for First Australians when they are delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies. The agency has signed a memorandum of understanding with local Aboriginal organisations that when government funds services for the wider community, Samaritans will work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups as equal partners in the delivery of those services. Where the target group is that of First Australians only, Samaritans will work with local Aboriginal organisations who will deliver these services. The agency furthers the ongoing work of Recognition and Relationship with a Reconciliation Action Plan to promote internally and externally the value of true reconciliation and a relationship that goes two ways.

Genuine friendships spend time listening and move to action out of a relationship of mutual respect. Genuine friendship seeks the inclusion of gifts and wisdom from all involved. It begins by getting to know your Aboriginal Land Council, the names of Indigenous elders in your community, attending and supporting cultural events, knowing your history pre colonisation and over the last 200 years or more. It begins in our hearts when we suspend for a time the idea that our culture is the centre of the universe and that we are able to learn from a person who is different from us.

Symbolic gestures assist too in showing our understanding and recognition of the place First Australian people within our communities. A Welcome to Country is an ancient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custom, a courtesy extended to visitors, a formal proceeding without which it would be dangerous to travel into someone else's country. Such acknowledgements in contemporary gatherings with a local elder may be dismissed as tokenism in that the relationship of power is so unequal, and the event would still go ahead even if the local elder refused to accord the welcome. However, as these ceremonies become a familiar and accepted part of Australian public life, so it is possible to see a kind of quiet revolution occurring - recognition on the part of the later-comer community of the co-existence of different systems of ownership, of a deep and on-going relationship to the land that goes beyond legal ownership.

Our mutual respect deepens when we place ourselves in the position of student rather than teacher. Our fellow First Australians have many wonderful teachings about the land, language, clan and ways of living that they are willing to share with us. This is a valuable and exciting gift we are being offered and which we need to recognise as a privilege to receive.

It could be likened to the rich meaning of hospitality in the scriptures. In Middle Eastern society, hospitality is more than providing food though this is an important element in offering a welcoming space. Genuine friendships emerge when hospitality is offered so that story, vision and need can be shared. For example 1 Peter 4: 9-10: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." Hospitality is a manifold experience of grace in which relationships and acts of service are entwined for mutual blessing.

But when hospitality is twisted and the boundaries of respect are broken the whole of Australian society suffers. This has been the painful theme of our history with First Australians. Historic breaches of trust by institutions and policies, both old and more recent, through removal of children, sexual abuse, violence and recently the caricature of Aboriginal men as perpetrators of great crime are examples when boundaries of hospitality are broken down.

We could understand the breach of hospitality in First Australian communities under the NTER by thinking through our own home spaces. If we want to renovate our homes we contract tradespeople to repair walls, fix plumbing, give assistance to making our homes better, but in such partnerships we don't expect the family china to be smashed and the front door left unlocked for anyone. The NTER was well intentioned but had no wisdom in how to enter the homes and country of First Australians in the NT.

I stand here today because of First Australians from the Northern Territory who have taught me about courage, faithfulness and friendship. They have taught me how to have a generous hospitality even to those who threaten me.

It is important that we take the time to build a relationship with First Australian people. The biggest weapon against ignorance is trust, when people listen to one another and build friendships in the life of the community, it helps us all to deal with the hard issues when they emerge and together we can begin to talk them through.

We may feel that we are right about something but with humility we learn to wait and consider before pressing our views on others. If we are right, time and developing friendships will eventually bring us to that place of hospitality where First Australian people respect us enough that we can gently offer our alternate point of view.

It is far too easy to imagine that we know the answers and to set about trying to lead people to our way of thinking. We must consciously avoid being judgemental. The past shows that criticism, even veiled criticism, can be seen as personal dislike.

We must be prepared for disappointment. We may not achieve what we think we come to achieve (although we may achieve something better). We may sometimes feel let down by the people with whom we have come to work. But the very future of our relationship with First Australians may well depend on our patience and humility in the task of supporting, encouraging and resourcing communities that experience generational disadvantage.

I commend to you that Recognition with Relationship is a reconciliation approach which believes that the only way to achieve lasting change is to work in partnership with First Australian communities to overcome the inequalities they experience. The Former Chair of NSW State Reconciliation Committee, Linda Burney, (1999) expressed it this way;

*Reconciliation means knowing this country's history and acknowledging the bad as well as the good. It means understanding and embracing difference, of language, of culture, of Law. Reconciliation is about ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their rights as the first peoples of this nation properly recognised and that recognition of those rights ensures them the same life chances as other Australians. Reconciliation is about acknowledging the wrongs of the past and pledging as a nation to right them."*

Such reconciliation means recognising First Australians in the Constitution alongside having comprehensive access to the services that Australian citizens have a right to receive. It also means recognising that problems will be solved more quickly and for the long term if First Australians are supported to manage the issues themselves. This is the principle of 'self-determination' which is recognised in the International Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

From national Indigenous leader Dr William Jonas AM, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, who described it this way;

*For Indigenous peoples to participate in Australian society as equals requires that we be able to live our lives free from assumptions by others about what is best for us. It requires recognition of our values, culture and traditions so that they can co-exist with those of mainstream society. It requires respecting our difference and celebrating it within the diversity of the nation.*

Let us renew our energies for dialogue that is honest and open. As the Bishop of Newcastle I have commenced meeting with local elders to develop a stronger awareness of the local issues and how the Diocese can take the next step in building relationships with First Australians.

Our churches can be places of shared community and the building of relationship through hospitality where all can contribute. Following my visit to an Aboriginal Land Council in May, with a follow-up meeting of Indigenous elders with me in June, a request emerged from an Indigenous pastor in Newcastle for help with a meeting space. Conversations between the Indigenous pastor and the local church community has led to this email yesterday;

“Dear Bishop Greg

As of this afternoon we (our parish) have agreed that (Biraban) local Aboriginal Community Church will use our parish hall for worship with effect from this Sunday [ July 27th].

Our discussions today have revealed some potential for future shared ministry - thanks be to God!

At the meeting today, all agreed there is a real sense of the Spirit guiding this project forward.

yours in Christ (Julie Turnbull)”

Recently in another parish an Anglican priest has been assisting with funerals with the local Aboriginal community. The priest is assisting in a request by local elders to translate portions of the prayers of the funeral service into the language of the local people.

With these and other acts of working in partnerships at local community and agency level and with a commitment by me to encourage cross cultural awareness education for all clergy and workers as part the development of a Diocesan wide Reconciliation Action Plan, we have green shoots of life-giving relationships with First Australians. As the Bishop I desire to see relationships of mutual trust, respect, the sharing of power and resources as equal partners. This means respecting the special rights that First Australians have as the original custodians of Australia. Reconciliation and friendships with First Australians is a work in progress that will benefit us all.

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