

Covenanting Statement

Covenant Statement read by the President of the Uniting Church Assembly to the Chairperson, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress on Sunday Afternoon, 10 July, 1994.

We meet in the presence of God who through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our unity “transcends cultural, economic, national and racial boundaries”. (Basis of Union, Paragraph 2). In this sharing of bread and wine we recall God’s gracious covenant with us and the whole creation and anticipate the joyful celebration of the fulfillment of God’s rule of love and justice among us. In the meantime, as people who share in this covenant, we are called to carry out faithfully Christ’s command to love one another and to order our life in the church in truth and justice. We who are non-aboriginal members of the Seventh Assembly, representing all members of the Church, make this covenanting statement.

Long before my people came to this land your people were here. You were nurtured by your traditions, by the land, and by the Mystery that surrounds us all and binds all creation together.

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.

In recent years we non-Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church in Australia have had the privilege of journeying with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and with other Aboriginal people. We have become more aware of the sad impact that in earlier times the church and our culture had on your people.

So on the one hand, we give thanks with you for those of our people who have lived among your people bearing faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which brings hope and liberation to all. We give thanks to God who has empowered and encouraged your people to stand firm and exercise moral leadership throughout these two centuries.

But on the other hand, we who are non-Aboriginal members of our church grieve with you, our Aboriginal and Islander brothers and sisters. We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture, and confused the Gospel with western ways. As a result you and we are the poorer and the image of God in us all is twisted and blurred, and we are not what God meant us to be.

We lament that our people took your lands from you as if it were land belonging to nobody, and often responded with great violence to the resistance of your people; our people took from you your means of livelihood and desecrated many sacred places. Our justice system discriminated against you, and the high incarceration rate of your people and the number of Black deaths in custody show that the denial of justice continues today.

Your people were prevented from caring for this land as you believe God required of you, and our failure to care for the land appropriately has brought many problems for all of us.

We regret that our churches cooperated with governments in implementing racist and paternalistic policies. By providing foster-homes for Aboriginal children, our churches in reality lent their support to the government practice of taking children from their mothers and families, causing great suffering and loss of cultural identity. Our churches cooperated with governments in moving people away from their land and resettling them in other places without their agreement.

I apologise on behalf of the Assembly for all those wrongs done knowingly or unknowingly to your people by the Church, and seek your forgiveness. I ask you to help us discover ways to make amends.

In 1988, the Heads of Churches called for a secure land base for dispossessed Aboriginal people, an assured place in the political process for Indigenous people, and an openness to get to know one another and learn from each other's culture and values. We commit ourselves to those objectives.

We rejoice in the promotion of understanding and commitment to change engendered by the Reconciliation Process and the High Court's native title decision and subsequent Commonwealth legislation. In the words of the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, these changes presage: 'A New Partnership'.

We recognise, as was declared in the Assembly's 1988 Statement to the Nation, that the Australian people and this church continue to benefit from the injustices done to your people over the past two centuries. We believe it is right for the Uniting Church to make reparations to you for land taken from your people and used by the churches which became part of this church.

The Church has already made transfers of property to Aboriginal people in recognition of our history. At this meeting the Assembly will determine its response to the further specific request from the Congress for the transfer of a proportion of the Church's assets to the Congress as reparation and as a means of supporting the Congress in its mission and service programs.

In 1988 you invited us non-Aboriginal members of this church to enter a covenant with the members of the Congress. We seek to journey together in the true spirit of Christ as we discover what it means to be bound to one another in a covenant. Christ has bound us each to himself, giving himself for us, and he has bound us to each other with his commandment 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

It is our desire to work in solidarity with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for the advancement of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness in this land, and we reaffirm the commitment made at the 1985 Assembly to do so. We want to bring discrimination to an end, so that your people are no longer gaoled in disproportionate numbers, and so that equal housing, health, education and employment opportunities are available for your people as for ours. To that end we commit ourselves to work with you towards national and state policy changes. We commit ourselves to build understanding between your people and ours in every locality, and to build relationships which respect the right of your people to self determination in the church and in the wider society.

We acknowledge that no matter how great our intentions however, we will not succeed in our efforts for reconciliation without Christ's redeeming grace and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit at work in both your people and ours.

I pray that this covenant will unite us in a multi-racial bond of fellowship which will be a witness to God's love for us all and a constant challenge to the continuing racism which oppresses you and separates us in this land. I pray that it will thus help us all to move towards a united Australia which respects this land in which we live, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.

How Congress Responded

This is the text of the Congress response to the Assembly covenanting statement. It was read by Pastor Bill Hollingsworth, National Chairperson of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

When God created the heavens and the earth He gave humankind his habitation and placed him within his bounds. When he did this He gave humankind stewardship over the bounds of his habitation. We are also told in the Bible that when God had finished creating it was good.

For many thousands of years Aboriginal people moved in harmony with creation and subdued it as necessary by hunting, fishing and gathering, thus respecting God's command and allowing the earth to sustain us. Our laws were developed by our relationship with the land and our intricate system of inter-tribal government. Trade was established which has never been acknowledged or understood appropriately by European researchers.

In 1788 this relation with creation was violently disrupted by the invasion of the Europeans, which robbed us of our stewardship of the land which God gave to us.

Your ancestors came to us in different ways and we saw little of our caring God in them. They did not come to us as God's will would dictate but to dispossess us, take our children, rape our women, kill our men and boys and destroy our culture, reject our values and beliefs and to ultimately claim our lands as their own.

As a direct result of this violent dispossession Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived as strangers and outcasts in their own land.

Whilst the church attempted to stem the decimation of our people and culture by providing missions and sanctuaries, in very many instances it did not attempt to understand our ways, our laws or social and economic structures.

We agree with you that the church, which had a responsibility to be the conscience of the invaders, in many instances relinquished this responsibility and joined with the invaders in a great many atrocities by smoothing the pillow for what was believed to be a dying race. Many of our people look upon the church in our country as condoning what was happening and watched the church stand by as our future was slowly being shortened by westernization, assimilation and policies of prejudice.

Along with the past governments of Australia, the church is held accountable in our society for the injustice/atrocities inflicted on our people.

Contrary to the belief of the invaders that they had a divine right to take possession of this land as their own, the God of righteousness, truth and justice has sustained us with the belief that one day we would be recognised as the true stewards of this land. This has come to pass through the High Court decision which was handed down in the Mabo case.

It is good and right that the church should repent any of its actions in support of a policy that violently discriminated against and oppressed God's stewards of this land.

The UAICC believes it is just for the Uniting Church, as a result of its enlightened understanding of the Gospel implications of creating new community to offer a practical response to the past history of dispossession and resulting disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Islander people from their social, economic and spiritual development of Australia by taking action to empower the UAICC ministry by offering to share the assets of the Uniting Church. It is difficult for us again, to recall the atrocities of the past and agree to walk towards you and offer forgiveness because many of our people feel your position of influence in our present society reminds us of who committed these great offences.

As a result of the violent dispossession and resulting isolation from economic empowerment in Australia, within a great number of our people there has developed a deep anger and resentment of European people.

Therefore it would be wrong to just say "I forgive", without reaching a commitment to work together to lay a new foundation upon which we may build a more just future together by ensuring that the Uniting Church plays an active role in providing adequate resources to address the present disadvantages caused by the past injustices and dispossession by the invasion of this country. Your commitment to be practical in seeking to be united in a new relationship will be assessed by your decisions to resource the Congress ministry and to be actively involved in ministry alongside and with Aboriginal and Islander people to change the present disadvantage.

Because it is pleasing to God to love one another, and it is our commitment to do so, we invite you on behalf of Congress members to develop a new relationship by entering into the struggle of those issues that presently are the cause of continuing injustice resulting in broken relationships.

You seek our forgiveness because your understanding has been enlightened by the spirit of the living God to recognise the failures and mistakes of the past and you desire to establish a new relationship based upon real recognition, justice and equality.

We come to this covenanting table with our gifts of Aboriginal spirituality, our culture, our Aboriginal way of loving and caring, our instinctive concern and a willingness to share and teach our history and every good aspect about being Aboriginal and Islander.

Our commitment to walk together with you as equals will be measured by our willingness to share with you our friendship and our love of God's creation. Our people have survived on the fruits of this country and have harvested from gardens as diverse as nature can offer.

We give to you our foods, drinks, the flesh of our animals, the fish of our waters and birds of the air that have sustained our people for generations gone by.

We pray that God will guide you, together with us, in developing a covenant to walk together practically so that the words of your statement may become a tangible expression of His justice and love for all creation. We ask you to remember this covenant by remembering that our land is now sustaining your people by God's grace.