

Thinking about the history, and the future, of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

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“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

Colossians 3:11-15

Introduction

On a Sunday afternoon in June, on a pastoral station in northern NSW, a group of Aboriginal women, with their children and the old men of their families, were preparing the evening meal. Earlier that day, ten of their younger men had left the station to help collect and cut bark on a neighbouring property. Also absent was the superintendent; only a handful of assigned convicts remained. When eleven white stockmen rode up to their huts, weapons drawn, there was little the families could do to protect themselves.

First, they were herded into a workmen’s hut. Later, hands tied together, they were led away from the huts to a nearby hill, taunted and tormented by the stockmen and the convicts. Twenty-eight defenceless people - all but two small boys and a young woman taken by one of the stockmen - were hacked to death, beheaded, and their bodies left where they fell.

The younger Aboriginal men returned to the station later that day, having heard that trouble was on the way, but they were too late to save their kin. So they fled, along with the tiny group of survivors. Two days later, the stockmen also returned. They burned the bodies of those they had slaughtered, and then tracked and murdered most of the men that had escaped.

The year was 1838, and the incident is now known by the name of the station on which it occurred: it is the Myall Creek Massacre. The ensuing investigation led to two trials: one found the stockmen innocent of any crime, but a second led to seven found guilty and executed.¹

Events like this cast a shadow over conversations about reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Our history is difficult, and it makes us confront difficult questions.

A complete answer to every question that might be raised in a discussion about Indigenous reconciliation is not easy to find. For instance, the recent *Closing the Gap Reports* show that Australian governments and the wider society are making little headway in improving the situation of indigenous Australians. Reconciliation includes more than ‘closing the gap’ in health, education and employment outcomes in indigenous communities. However, the exact basis and scope of reconciliation is open to debate.

In light of the complexity of the issues, this resource paper sets out a framework for thinking Christianly about reconciliation, and also offers some ideas for how local congregations might work with local Indigenous communities to create a local culture of reconciliation as an outworking of the gospel. As John Harris has written, Christians don’t need to wait for a piece of paper — or an amended Constitution — to show a spirit of reconciliation to the world, or to grow the work that is already happening in some churches.² We trust that this resource paper will help our church to do that, and also that those who have a particular interest in the wider questions around reconciliation might be encouraged to get involved in action beyond their local community.

The resource paper comprises five sections. The first outlines the current context and presents a brief summary of history between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians, to show the field into which we are sowing the gospel of Jesus.

The second provides context and commentary, from a legal perspective, on the debate over the issue of sovereignty. The third examines the ideas of corporate sin, apology and reconciliation, and shows what the Bible says to us about these things. The fourth considers how the gospel addresses the questions related to reconciliation.

The final section makes some recommendations about how local congregations might work towards reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The Committee also hopes that the resource paper might serve as a resource to help Australian Christians think about their vote if the Commonwealth Government achieves its goal of presenting a referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution.

Australia’s history of reconciliation

The current debate ...

The year 2017 brought milestone anniversaries in the story of reconciliation in Australia: the introduction of Commonwealth legislation that gave all Aboriginal Australians the right to vote in Federal elections (55 years); the 1967 Constitutional referendum (50); the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra (45); the creation of the first Commonwealth Department for Aboriginal Affairs (45); the first meeting of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (25); the historic High Court *Mabo* decision, which declared that



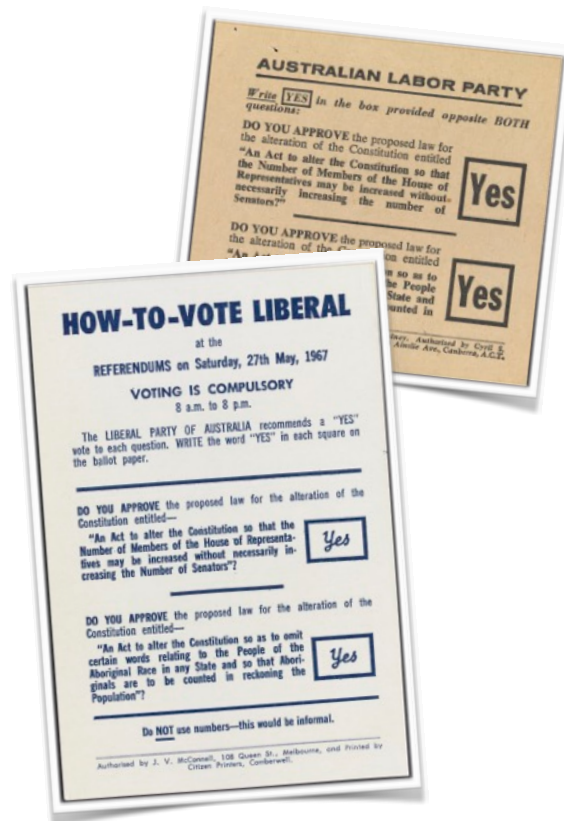
Australia was not *terra nullius* (25); the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report about Australia's Stolen Generations (20); and the publication of the first report for Federal Parliament about recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Australian Constitution (5).

It also marked ten years since the Council of Australian Governments agreed to work with each other, and with Indigenous communities, to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage; and nine years since Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister, formally apologised to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian Parliament.

After all those milestones, how far has Australian society come? And what should Christians plan for the future?

The 1967 referendum achieved two things: it removed a section of the Constitution (s.127) that specifically excluded Aboriginal Australians from population counts; and it amended the "races power" (s.51(xxvi)) so that Federal Parliament could begin to make laws for "the peace, order and good government" of Aboriginal Australians. Fifty years on, Australia is debating further Constitutional changes to properly recognise our First Nations. A Referendum Council, appointed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in December 2015, was asked to bring recommendations, by the end of June 2017, on steps that might be taken to bring about a successful referendum.

Part of this process was a series of Dialogues culminating in the First Nations Constitutional Convention at Uluru in May 2017. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, issued at the close of the Convention, affirmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first sovereign nations of Australia, and declared that sovereignty "has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown." The Convention recognised the many challenges faced by First Nations communities and attributed them to a problem that is structural in nature: "*the torment of our powerlessness*". Consequently, it sought constitutional reform



that would empower First Nations people to take "a rightful place" in their own country, including a voice enshrined in the Constitution and a *Makarrata Commission* to supervise the making of agreements between governments and First Nations people.

The Convention stressed the importance of acknowledging the truth about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the process of Australia preparing for Constitutional reform. Christians in Australia should recognise the importance of this acknowledgement, especially since Christians and the Christian church have a significant role in the history.

The Referendum Council recommended Constitutional recognition of an Indigenous representative assembly, a "Voice to Parliament" that would have "the right to be consulted on legislation and policies that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples". In October 2017, the Australian Government rejected this proposal, arguing that it was new to Australia's public discussion about Constitutional change, and also that a representative assembly of this nature "would inevitably become seen as a third chamber of Parliament." The Australian Government did not believe "such an addition to

our national representative institutions is either desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum”.

The Parliamentary process was restarted in March 2018, with the establishment of a Joint Select Committee to consider the work of various committees and councils to date, and to again recommend options for Constitutional change. The new Committee is expected to present final report to Parliament by the end of November 2018.

The history ...

Lieutenant James Cook claimed the eastern part of Australia for the British in 1770, naming it New South Wales. In 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived with the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, and began to implement the British government's instructions to establish the first British colony in New South Wales. Despite the obvious presence of Aboriginal people on the land, it was assumed *terra nullius*, belonging to no one. This notion was formalised in 1835 with a proclamation from Governor Richard Bourke that any contract established to purchase land from “Aboriginal Natives”, anywhere on the continent, was “void and of no effect against the rights of the Crown.”³ The next section of the paper will consider this issue more fully.

In addition to taking land, the colonists also took Indigenous lives. Massacres and mass-poisonings in all the British colonies on the continent are well-documented. In a remarkable proclamation in 1816, NSW Governor Lachlan Macquarie authorised settlers along the rivers Hawkesbury and Nepean to form themselves into associations for “mutual relief and assistance” against attacks from “hostile natives”, and to “repel such attacks or incursions by force of arms.”⁴ Though he declared such action should be defensive in nature, and never provocative, perhaps the proclamation shaped the future. In NSW, massacres claimed hundreds of lives: Appin (1816), Bathurst (1824), Waterloo Creek (1838), Myall Creek (1838), Evans Head (1842), along the Macleay River (1838-1851), and other places. Motive is difficult to ascribe in all cases,

but it appears from the records that many of these deaths were connected with the taking of land, or were retribution for Aboriginal action against the colonists (such as the stealing of livestock).

Further afield, Tasmania's “Black War” between 1828 and 1832 has been described as nothing short of genocide, in that it resulted in the elimination of the full-descent Aboriginal population that had lived there prior to colonization. The written, and even artistic, records of our country testify to the violence committed toward our First Nations. Charles Finch Hatton, writing in 1886, makes a comment that is harsh, but not unique in sentiment: “Whether the Blacks deserve any mercy at the hands of the pioneering squatters is an open question, but that they get none is certain. They are a doomed race, and before many years they will be completely wiped out of the land.”⁵

The voices and actions of Christians helped to moderate the extent of the murder and dispossession of First Nations people. Harris



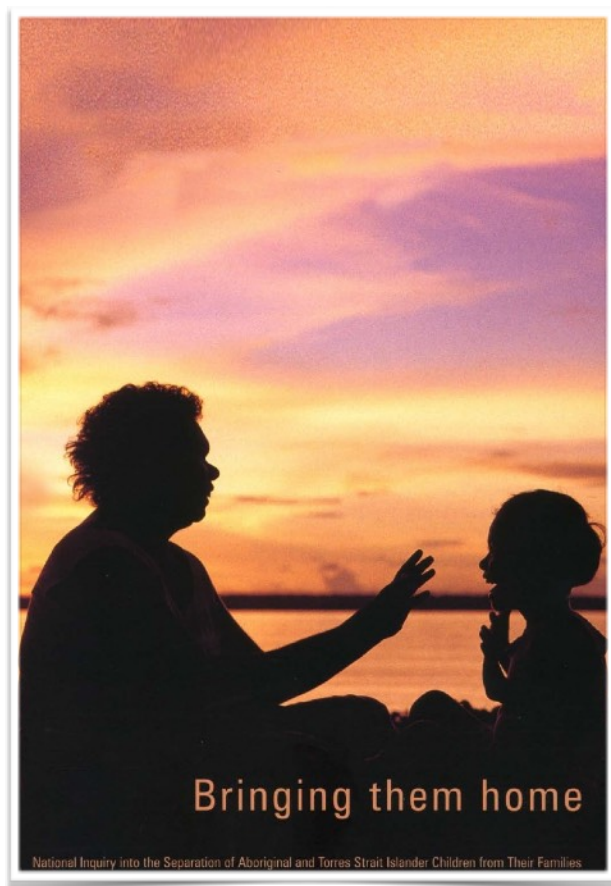
quotes John Gribble, pioneer missionary worker to Aboriginal people: *"If I am to continue working as a missionary, it must be on the lines of justice and right to the Aborigines of this land, in opposition to the injustice and wrong-doing of unprincipled white men."*⁶ This attitude exemplifies the heart of many who took the gospel to Aborigines, and also of those who protected them in the face of violence. Harris has thoroughly documented their work in his book, *One Blood*. It's not an easy book to read, chronicling as it does two centuries of interactions between Australia's First Nations and the colonists – a history that could at best be described as "chequered" – but it represents a significant contribution to our understanding of the history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Separation and assimilation

From the middle of the 19th century, the Australian colonies began to adopt a policy of separating children of mixed heritage from their Aboriginal parents. This began with the Victorian *Aboriginal Protection Act (1869)*, which gave extensive powers to the state to regulate the lives of indigenous people, and later legislation (1886) which aimed to assimilate Aboriginal people of mixed descent into white society by separating them from their home communities on stations or in Aboriginal reserves.⁷

One of the most shocking articulations of the policy was made by O. A. Neville, who served as Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915. He believed that emancipation of Aboriginal people would come only from their biological absorption into the Caucasian race, because lighter skin colour would lead to acceptance by white society and loss of Aboriginal identity. "Are we to have one million blacks in the Commonwealth," he asked, "or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?"⁸

Between 1910 and 1970 significant numbers of Indigenous children were removed from their families, in some places and times as many as one in three children in a community.⁹



Aboriginal children who came into the state's care were far less likely to see their families again than white children in a similar position. The result is that "most [Indigenous] families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children."¹⁰

The 1997 report *Bringing Them Home* is the result of a national Inquiry into government practice of separating, often under compulsion or duress, many Indigenous children from their families. The report includes quotes from submissions to the Inquiry to describe the consequences for Indigenous people. Many tell of harmful physical and psychological effects at the time of separation and in the years following; some acknowledge the love shown by adoptive families, and access to better health care and education. The unifying theme is loss of connection, as described in this submission: *"Our life pattern was created by the government policies and are forever with me, as though an invisible anchor around my neck. The moments that should be shared and rejoiced by a family unit, for [my brother] and mum and I are forever lost. The stolen years that are worth more than any treasure are irrecoverable."*¹¹

The Inquiry recognised that some separations may have been justified (in order to protect the child from neglect or abuse). However, it identified the key reasons for separating children from their families: a desire to segregate full-descent Aboriginals, and a policy of “merging” and “assimilating” mixed-descent Aboriginals with the white Australian population. Implicit in these policies was the notion that in Indigenous culture there was nothing valuable, or worthy of preservation.

What was the role of the church in the implementation of these policies? Harris notes that Australian churches, and other Christian organisations, received “stolen” children into their institutions; in fact they relied on these children for ongoing government funding. While some Aboriginal people had positive reports about their experience in these institutions, Harris argues that regimentation, restrictions, harsh discipline and rules, and a culture of diminished grace were, over all, a “debasing of the gospel”. He concludes: “It’s an undeniable historical fact that Australian churches were, in this way, complicit in the system of removing Aboriginal children from their families”.¹²

All Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Christian and non-Christian, carry the legacy of the combined injustices perpetrated against our First Nations people: a cocktail of guilt and hurt that runs through the generations.

In 1997, the Assembly of PCNSW responded to the *Bringing Them Home* report by recognising that “the policy of Australian governments of separating indigenous children from their families and communities was based on sinful racist assumptions about indigenous people and their culture.” It also recognised that members of the Presbyterian church had been involved in government work to set and implement these policies, and that “although this ministry by Presbyterians was carried out with the genuine desire to help indigenous people and their children, and to glorify God, and although in many cases indigenous people and their children were helped through ministry by Presbyterians, yet that policy and its implementation has caused

great harm to many indigenous children and their families and communities.” The church’s failure, as an institution and as individual Christians, to stand against the racist assumptions of the policy was recognised as sin, and a matter for regret. An unreserved apology was offered by the PCNSW to all Indigenous Australians.¹³

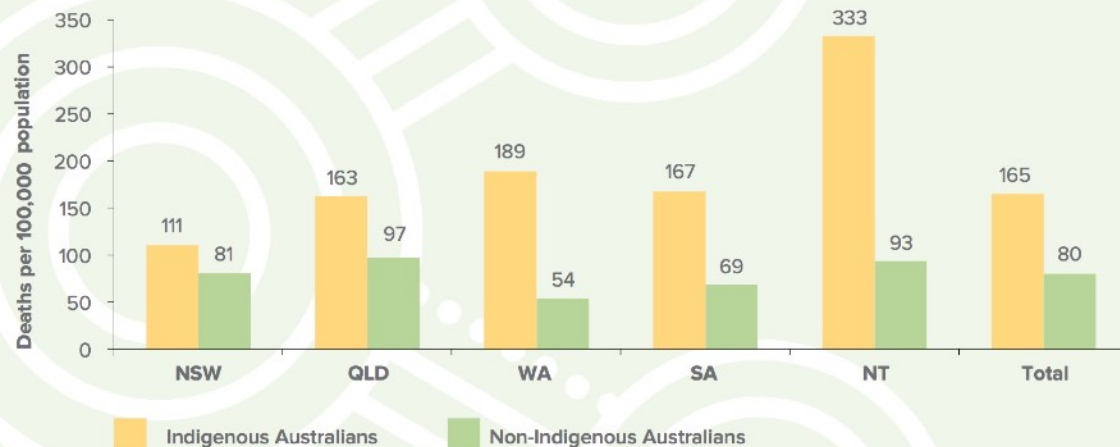
Peter Adam writes that “old sins cast long shadows.” For Australia, he says, those shadows include “the memories of land theft and slaughter, and the fracturing and loss of structures of society, and the weakening of family identity and family life. The sin of slow genocide of most of a people still shadows our national life.”¹⁴

The 2017 and 2018 *Closing the Gap* reports released by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, give us the current picture of the “shadows” - the challenges experienced in the daily lives of our First Nations people. While the reports highlight real successes achieved by individuals and communities working with organisations and governments around the country, they also acknowledge “the stark reality that we are not seeing sufficient national progress on the Closing the Gap targets”.¹⁵

Some examples of the “stark reality” include:¹⁶

- The proportion of very remote Indigenous Australian students reaching national minimum standards for Year 5 numeracy is, at 42%, less than half that of very remote non-Indigenous Australians.
- Just 29% of Indigenous Australians with only Year 9 attainment are employed, while the figure for non-Indigenous Australian is much higher (47%).
- Indigenous mortality rates from chronic diseases have decreased, but mortality rates from cancers are rising, and the gap widening.
- Data from 2013 shows Indigenous males have a life expectancy at birth that is 10.6 years less than non-Indigenous males; for women, the gap is 9.5 years.

Figure 2: Child mortality rates (0-4 years) by Indigenous status: NSW, Qld, WA, SA and the NT, 2011-2015



Source: ABS and AIHW analysis of National Mortality Database

- The smoking rate for Indigenous Australians is almost 3 times that of non-Indigenous Australians.
- In the two years to June 2015, the rate of hospitalisation as a result of assault was 14 times higher for Indigenous Australians than for non-Indigenous Australians. For Indigenous women, the rate is 30 times higher than for non-Indigenous women. For Indigenous women in remote areas, the rate is 53 times higher.
- Incarceration rates for Indigenous Australians are 13 times that of non-Indigenous Australians, and the majority of Indigenous Australians in prison have committed violence-related or other harm-related crimes. At June 2016, 27% of prisoners in Australia were Indigenous. (Note that the percentage of Australians identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in 2016 was estimated to be 3.3%.)

These are sobering facts. They should prompt us to recognise the need to think seriously about questions of responsibility and reconciliation and reparation, questions to which we will turn after we have considered that of the settled-conquered land.

European settlement an invasion?

In March 2016, the media reported that the University of NSW had produced a Diversity Toolkit on indigenous terminology for its undergraduate students which argued that "Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied, and colonised".¹⁷ There was some public backlash to the guidelines including claims that the university was trying to "rewrite history" and that the Toolkit represented "anti-intellectualism and political correctness at its worst," while painting the publishers of the Toolkit with distasteful language.¹⁸ The media reports and subsequent public discourse illustrate that people hold their positions on whether Australia was "settled" as not only a matter of fact but also with much emotional attachment.

The British acquired Australia on a purported basis of settlement. But was this classification correct?

Under British colonial law in 1788, there were broadly two bases for the British Crown to acquire new land: (1) by settlement of empty (or at least uncultivated) land and (2) by conquest of the previous occupiers of the land.¹⁹ In the first category, the laws of England become

immediately in force at the point of settlement, and in the second category, the old laws of the previous occupiers remain until such time that the Crown changes them.²⁰

In the latter category, it was the practice for the British Crown to enter into treaty agreements with the conquered peoples of the land and until such time that English law repudiated local laws, the local laws remained in force. For example, the British Crown entered into 11 treaties with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (also known as the Numbered Treaties) and in the case of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi with the various Maori chiefs of North Island. However unbalanced and flawed those treaties were, they gave at least some recognition of ownership of land to its indigenous people and afforded them some basic rights.

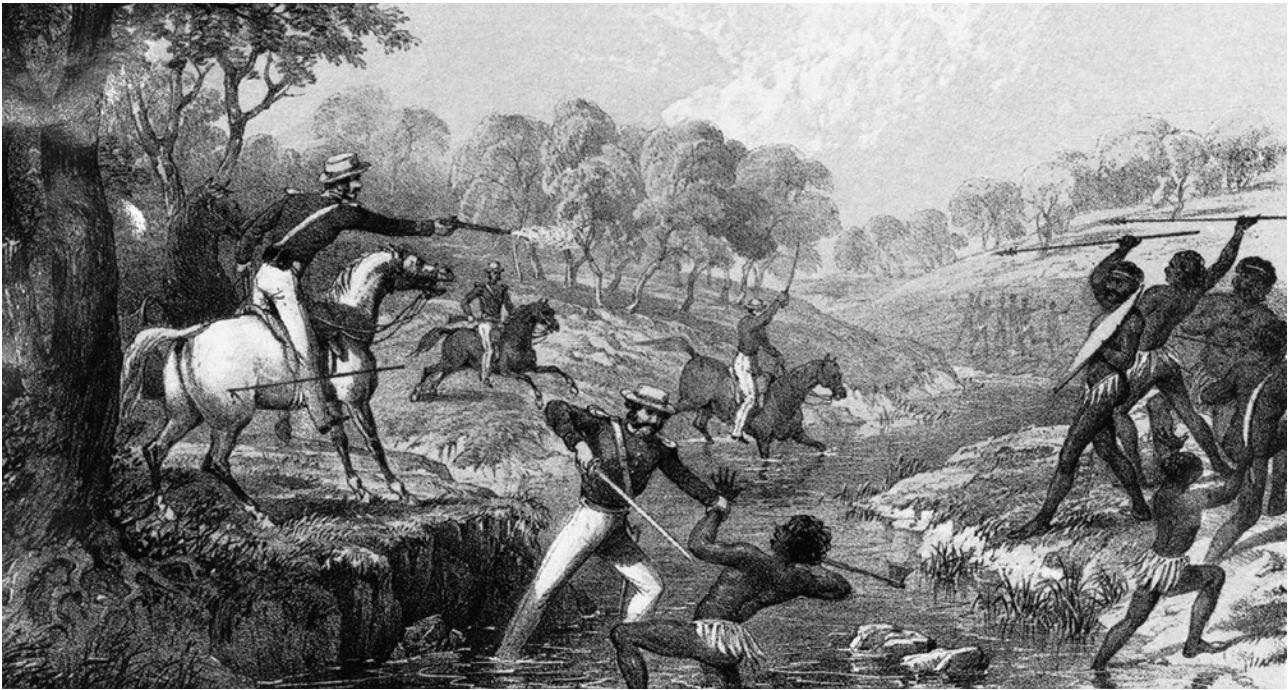
Australia was different. British colonists took steps (such as setting up Marks and Inscriptions) to acquire land under the first category of settlement and it was assumed that Australia was to be treated as "uninhabited". Subsequent extensions of British rule were then made on the assumptions that the entire continent was to be acquired through settlement.²¹ Accordingly, no treaty-like instruments were entered into with the indigenous people of Australia.

The very existence of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia should on one view, on the basis of that fact, mean that the treatment of Australia as "uninhabited" was a grave error.

In 1837, the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Aborigines stated: "The land has been *taken* from [the indigenous peoples of Australia] without the assertion of any other title than that of superior force.... *whatever may have been the injustice of this encroachment*, there is no reason to suppose that either justice or humanity would now be consulted by receding from it." (emphasis added) The commentary from the Select Committee implicitly accepts prior ownership of the land by the indigenous people of Australia.

As early as 1829, the Australian courts were required to consider the legally ambiguous status of the Aboriginal people in Australia.²² In 1899, the Privy Council stated that New South Wales was "a tract of territory, practically unoccupied, without settled inhabitants or settled land at the time when it was peacefully annexed to the British dominions",²³ however this view is no longer accepted by the highest court of Australia.





In *Commonwealth v Coe* (1979) 24 ALR 118, Justice Murphy sitting on the High Court of Australia observed "Although the Privy Council referred in *Cooper v Stuart* to peaceful annexation, the aborigines did not give up their lands peacefully: they were killed or removed forcibly from the lands by United Kingdom forces or the European colonists in what amounted to attempted (and in Tasmania almost complete) genocide. The statement by the Privy Council may be regarded either as having been made in ignorance or as a convenient falsehood to justify the taking of aborigines' land".

In *Mabo v the State of Queensland* (1992) 175 CLR 1, the High Court wholly rejected the notion that Australia was uninhabited, and found that "the lands of this continent were not *terra nullius* or practically unoccupied in 1788". The High Court accepted that the assumption that Australia was unoccupied was false, and opined that "the fiction by which the rights and interests of indigenous inhabitants in land were treated as non-existent was justified by a policy which has no place in the contemporary law of this country". It also noted the observations of Justice Blackburn in *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd* (1971) 17 FLR 141 who said: "The evidence shows a subtle and elaborate system highly

adapted to the country in which the [Aboriginal] people led their lives, which provided a stable order of society and was remarkably free from the vagaries of personal whim or influence. If ever a system could be called 'a government of laws, and not of men', it is that shown in the evidence before me". The High Court expressed reservations about Australia being characterised as settled rather than conquered in light of historical facts.

Mabo did not unequivocally determine the settled-conquered colony issue. This is because the High Court (notwithstanding finding that the Aboriginal people of Australia were the traditional owners of the land), proceeded to determine the substantive proceedings on the assumption that Australia *was* validly settled. The reason behind this could be attributed the High Court finding that the settled-conquered question was not an issue which could be determined by a court. As one legal commentator observed: "*This legal classification is unreviewable in the courts even though there be acknowledgement by the bench that some lands in the colonies were relinquished by Aborigines only after hostilities or negotiations*".²⁴

It may be that there is no reason at present for Australian courts to determine this question. However, it is still an important moral issue.

The facts of the situation, as recognised by several of the legal opinions noted above, leads to the view that European settlement was an invasion. The Aboriginal people of Australia were the first inhabitants of the land (as the High Court accepted); British colonists should not have classified Australia as uninhabited.

While there may be few legal consequences of holding this view, there are moral implications for Christians. While the High Court of Australia does not have power to determine such a question, God, as the Sovereign ruler of the universe under whom all authority is given, *is* able and *does* judge the actions of our nation past and present.

It must be accepted that, under God's law, there is no moral category to justify the British occupation of Australia. The Bible shows that God has overseen the formation of nations and established them in their lands. The classic text about this is Acts 17:26: "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (see also Dt 32:8; Job 12:23; Gen 9:19; 10:32; 11:8-9). When the Bible refers to nations, it is not necessarily referring to a political state — an organized political community under a government. It includes various groups which might be bound by kinship, location or government. The point is that "cities, countries and empires rise and fall during the course of history, both in terms of their political power ... and ... boundaries" and God "the Lord of the history of the human race".²⁵ Although the nations have a problematic origin in Babel, in God's providence they are beneficial, and are a basic part of human experience.

God allocates lands to nations (Dt 2:9, 19); he rules over them and destroys them (Ex 23:28; 34:24; Ps 2:1; 7:8; 46:6; Isa 13:4; Jer 25:9). The

most dramatic biblical example of God removing people from their land is, of course, the conquest of Canaan. This was the result of God's gift of the land to his people (Lev 20:24; Deut 7:1), but only after the sin of the Canaanites reached the point at which they lost their right to inhabit the land (Lev 18:24; 20:23; Dt 9:4; 18:12). The possession of the land by Israel must be viewed as a special case, in which God revealed to Israel that they were to take the land and commanded them how it was to be taken. Such 'Holy War' does not give a general basis for the invasion of nations, by other nations. Even when nations are used by God to punish Israel, they are still held accountable for their unrighteousness in the way they prosecute their actions (Hab 2:6–17).

As the first people, God allocated the lands of Australia to the Aboriginal peoples. How are we, then, to assess the process of European settlement, based on a false claim of *terra nullius* and involving appalling acts of violence? We are not asking how God may have used this settlement in his providence (even to bring the gospel to indigenous people), but how we assess the actions of taking possession of the land.

Christian tradition offers us a useful way of thinking about this assessment in the theory of 'just war'. This was developed especially by Augustine and Aquinas, endorsed by Luther, Calvin and other Reformation thinkers and accepted by the Westminster Confession (WCF 23:2). It continues to provide the basis for much International law. Judged against this standard, the British settlement of Australia must be considered deeply unjust.²⁶

Just war theory holds that in order to be justified a war must be: authorized by legitimate public officials; conducted for a just cause when there is no real possibility that the desired outcome could be achieved in some other way, and fought with a good intent based on a conscientious estimate of the proportionality of damages done to the good achieved, or the evil avoided, and

with the prospects for success with the likelihood that war will establish a just settlement. To be just, war must also be conducted justly: avoiding direct attacks against non-combatants, and avoiding weapons and strategies that inflict disproportionate harm. Under this view it is usually only defensive wars which are justified or acts of international policing. Assessed against just war criteria, the occupation of Australia fails on several counts. The settlement could have been achieved by other means, such as a series of treaties; it was often conducted violently without any express permission from the proper authorities (and even against their explicit instructions) and it employed weapons and strategies which inflicted horrendous losses on the indigenous people.

On this basis, Christians should accept that Australia had been misclassified as a settled colony, and recognise the grave injustice done to the indigenous people of Australia. Not only was it unjustified and a contravention of God's law, it was a grave injustice under human laws. Had Australia been classified as a conquered colony, the Aboriginal people would have had at least notional recognition that they were the

traditional owners of the land (perhaps even the possibility of self-determination) by way of a legal instrument such as a treaty. This opportunity was taken from them whether it was by way of fraud or mistake of fact.

Injustice remains even if we allow the most generous interpretation that classification of Australia as a settled colony was a mistake of fact by the first British arriving on the shores of Australia. Under God's law, a mistake of fact or law does not absolve a trespasser's sin (Leviticus 5:17; Numbers 22:34; Luke 12:47-48).

Accordingly, Christians should recognise that the occupation of Australia and its classification as a settled colony, rather than a conquered one, are grave injustices done to the indigenous people.

Corporate Sin, Apology and Reconciliation

If we accept that the occupation of Australia was a wrong, the question arises as to whether current generations of non-indigenous Australians bear any responsibility for these actions and whether there is any basis for offering apologies or seeking reconciliation.



Five dimensions of what is required to achieve reconciliation in Australia.
Source: *The State of reconciliation in Australia*, 2016.

While the term ‘reconciliation’ can simply imply that there are fractured relationships which need to be restored, the use of the term in this setting implies something about wrongs which need to be righted. The 2016 report of Reconciliation Australia, *The State of reconciliation in Australia*, states that reconciliation involves not only social justice concerns such as “positive two-way relationships built on trust and respect ... between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians” and equal participation of indigenous people in Australian society, but also “widespread acceptance of our nation’s history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated” (see diagram, p12). The recognition of historic wrongs implies that there is a need for, at least, apologies, as well as correcting social injustices.

Can we, as Christians, affirm the need to apologies, and even offer apologies of our own?

The Bible recognises the reality of corporate and generational responsibility and guilt. The pattern of shared national responsibility is clear throughout the history of Israel. The covenantal blessings and curses are given to Israel as a nation (Dt 27:14-29:1) and the sin of one or a few could bring judgement on the whole people (Josh 7:1), especially when the sin was that of the king of Israel (e.g. 2 Sam 21:1-14).

One of the key texts which describe the character of the Lord says that “he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Ex 34:7; Num 14:18; Isa 65:6-7; Jer 32:18). This is very fully illustrated in Daniel’s prayer of confession in which the righteous man confesses to the Lord the sins which are, primarily, those of the Israel and Judah before the exile (Dan 9:4–15).

The Bible is also clear about individual guilt (Ps 32:1-2, 5; Pr 21:16; Rom 3:9-20, 23). Some commentators suggest on the basis of Jeremiah 31:30 that corporate guilt is only a feature of the Old Covenant and that in the New Covenant “everyone will die for their own sin”. Yet Ezekiel 18 says the same thing about the Old Covenant. Since the people of God are a nation in the Old Covenant, then it is no surprise that corporate

guilt is a more important feature of the Old Testament, than in the new. Nevertheless, both individual and corporate guilt are ongoing realities in human life.

Reformed Christians should not find it difficult to understand that later generations in a nation share in the guilt of earlier generations and can rightly offer apologies and seek reconciliation. Reformed theology is familiar with the idea of corporate and inherited guilt. The covenant theology which is basic to much of our doctrine, and is key to the structure of the Westminster Confession, assumes the principle of corporate guilt. Because Adam was the federal head of all humanity, then his guilt was imputed to all humanity (WCF 6:3). It’s not that corporate national guilt is anywhere near equivalent to inherited guilt from Adam, nor is it the same as individual guilt, but the idea should prompt us to respond to the wrongs of the past by seeking reconciliation today.

Christians should welcome the reconciliation process in Australia; both for the good of the Indigenous population who are one of the most disadvantaged groups in our society, and because we recognise that all non-indigenous Australians share in certain level of responsibility for the wrongs of the past.

The Gospel and Reconciliation

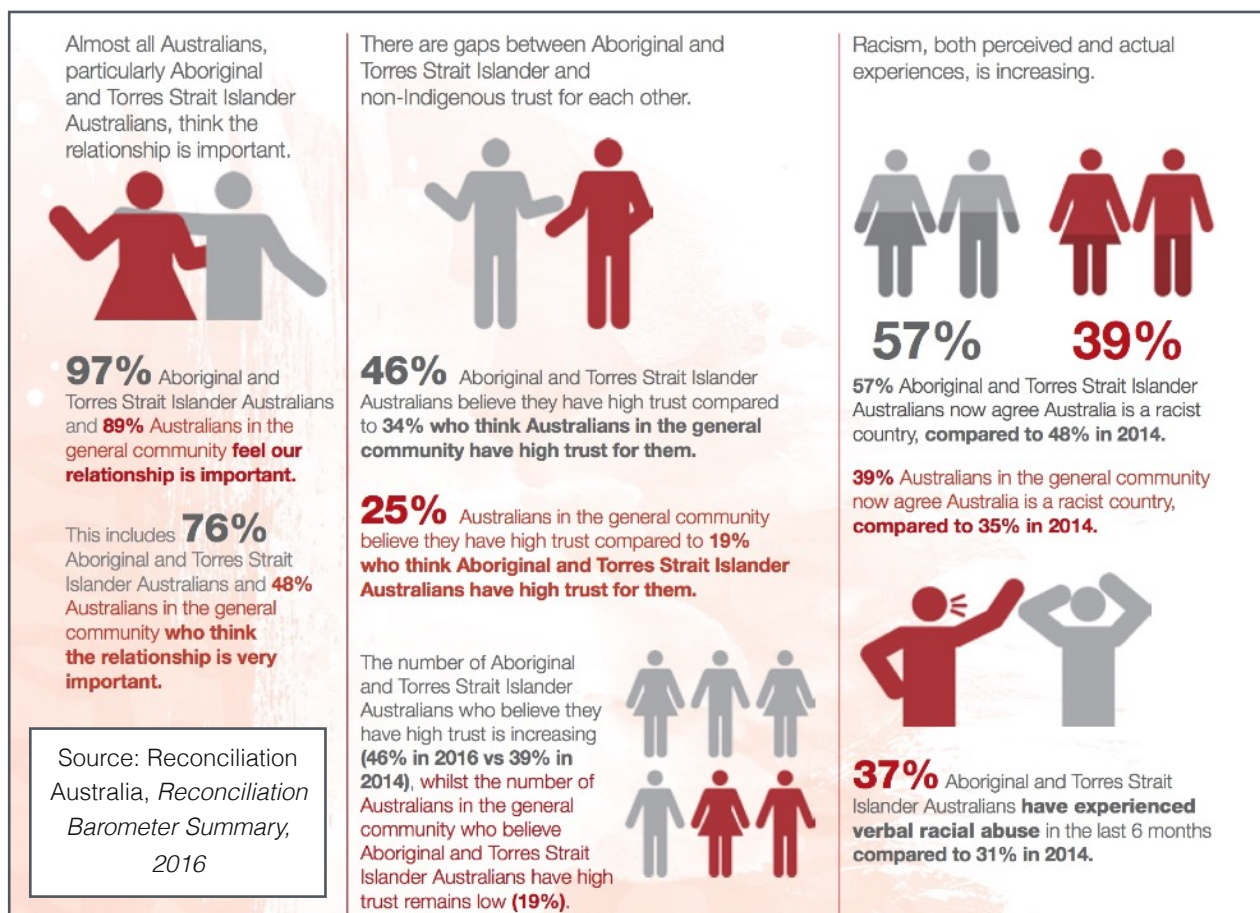
Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian gospel, which proclaims that we are reconciled to God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-21; Rom. 5:8-11; 11:15; Col. 1:20-22; Eph. 2:12-17). Those who were enemies of God and deserving of his just condemnation have been acquitted and restored to friendship with him (Rom 5:10). The preaching of the gospel is a ministry of reconciliation by which God continues to restore sinners to himself (2 Cor 5:18-20). The present reconciliation through Christ in the gospel anticipates the full and final reconciliation of all things. “Because humanity plays the key role in the ordering of God’s world, human reconciliation will lead to the restoration of creation” (cf Eph 1:10).²⁷

The reconciliation of believers with God now, in anticipation of cosmic reconciliation at the return of Christ, is the basis for human reconciliation in the present, in Christ. In Paul's letters this is primarily applied to the theological distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In Christ, the two groups have been brought together in peace to form "one new humanity" and they are to recognise one another as "fellow citizens" and members of God's household who are being built together as a "holy temple in the Lord" (Eph2:14–22). The inclusion of Gentiles into the church through Christ is the way God displays his rich wisdom to the spiritual powers and authorities (Eph 3:7–12). The reality of reconciliation in Christ is the reason Paul is so concerned for Jews and Gentiles to live in unity with each other in the church, and he urges them to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph4:3–4).

While the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles is in the forefront of the discussion of in the New Testament, it is not the only indication of genuine human reconciliation through Christ. Paul says in the church "Christ is all, and is in

all" so "there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised", but also no barbarian, Scythian, slave or free (Col 3:11). Similarly, in Galatians, while focussing on the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ Paul also says there is "neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" (Gal 3:26–29). He does not mean that those distinctions are no longer recognisable, but that the divisions they imply are not to be part of Christian fellowship. Ethnicity, rank and gender are not to be barriers to Christian unity, but we are to live as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The message of gospel reconciliation has important implications for Christian thought about the reconciliation process in Australia. Primarily, it means that genuine reconciliation is found in Christ by the gospel. The sad history of the mistreatment of the Indigenous people of Australia and the sins which stain our past are only properly overcome in the work of Christ. So, the fullest contribution which the Christian church can make to national reconciliation is to proclaim Christ.



Secondly, the church must be a community of reconciliation. We should commit ourselves to maintaining and expressing the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. The Presbyterian Church of Australia has a history of supporting the ministry of Mt Druitt Indigenous Church, and also has a partnership with Australian Indigenous Ministries. These are expressions of unity with indigenous brothers and sisters; the gospel calls us to far more. Many of our churches are in areas with significant Indigenous populations and can seek to work with Christians and churches in those communities.

Thirdly, while we recognise that the steps to national reconciliation are not directly grounded in Christ and do not flow from gospel ministry, we see something of the faint echo of the gospel and support this work for the common good. We shouldn't confuse national reconciliation with gospel reconciliation, but we should support the national process because we value reconciliation. We are told to pray for all people, including our rulers, so that our society might be blessed with peace. Paul ties this instruction to God's peace-making in Christ (1 Tim 2:1–7), perhaps because God's peace-making is the model for our prayers, or perhaps because a peaceful society allows a free gospel ministry which extends God's peace. Either way, as we pray for common peace we should also support a process which seeks such peace.

We've already noted that the Assembly of PCNSW considered the *Bringing Them Home* Report in 1997. In 2003, it considered the issue of reconciliation, and acknowledged that "wrong has been done to Aboriginal people through the colonisation process." It recognised "the complexity of the issues" and "the need for reconciliation between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people as a result of the events of Australian history". Acknowledging that "it's the church's responsibility to take the initiative in the reconciliation process", the Assembly encouraged local congregations to explore ways to be involved with local Aboriginal people as an act of reconciliation, and also that Aboriginal Christians get involved in the reconciliation process.²⁸

Recommendations for action

Christians should recognise the needs of national reconciliation, including apologies, and support the ongoing process of reconciliation. This will have implications for our support for a possible amendment to the constitution, but at this stage a referendum is still some way off.

More importantly, the church as a wider institution, and particularly as local congregations, should strive to be a community in which there is genuine reconciliation through Christ. This certainly means our congregations should welcome Indigenous Australians, and it will probably also mean seeking fellowship with Aboriginal Christians in other churches and positive contact with local Aboriginal communities.

Our churches should be informed about the history of European settlement of Australia. As well as the general history, there is great value in local congregations understanding the history of settlement in their own area. Congregations can connect with local history groups and local council librarians who can provide information about the story of local Aboriginal peoples and their engagement with non-Aboriginal Australians, as well as the stories of newer immigrants from overseas. This is all helpful for understanding our context for sharing the gospel.

Congregations can develop a culture of informed prayer for Aboriginal Australians. This can happen in the Sunday service, or at dedicated information or mission events. Organisations that provide useful resources include:

Australian Presbyterian World Mission, which partners with missionaries and other mission agencies to bring the gospel to Aboriginal Australians. APWM regularly provides our church with information about the prayer (and financial) needs of gospel work with and for these communities (www.apwm.org.au).

Grasstree Gathering is an annual event with a focus on celebrating, encouraging, equipping and inspiring emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Christian Leaders. It also serves to inform non-Aboriginal Australians through video resources available on the website. (<https://www.grasstreegathering.org.au>)

NAIDOC promotes celebration of Aboriginal achievements and culture, as well awareness of the status and treatment of Aboriginal Australians. *NAIDOC week* (July 8-15, 2018) is an appropriate opportunity for prayer in our congregations. (<http://www.naidoc.org.au>)

National Reconciliation Week (May 27 - June 3, 2018) is also a good opportunity for congregations to focus on awareness of, and prayer for, indigenous issues. The *Reconciliation Australia* website provides information about events, as well as other useful resources. (<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week/>)

Australians Together provides resources for churches and Christian small groups. (<https://australiansitogether.org.au>)

Common Grace is an Australian Christian movement with an interest in a wide range of social justice issues, including those of concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. (<https://www.commongrace.org.au>)

TEAR Australia is involved in Aboriginal reconciliation work, offering resources for churches that want to bridge the gap in their understanding and become connected to the lives of local Aboriginal communities (<https://www.tear.org.au/dhumba/>).

The website of *Friends of Myall Creek* (<https://www.myallcreek.org>) provides a full account of the Myall Creek Massacre in 1838, as well as resources and information about other similar events in our history. It also gives points of contact for people who want to be involved in the Myall Creek Memorial.

The story of Myall Creek continues ...

Graeme and Sallie Cordiner, from Drummoyne Presbyterian Church, have been involved with the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial for the last twenty years. For the last fifteen years, Graeme has been involved on the national committee and as convenor of the Sydney Friends of Myall Creek. This is Graeme's testimony about the impact of this work on his life and the lives of others.

Myall Creek met me rather than the reverse. It crossed my path and I knew my name was on it. I just knew, a God thing. Yet even before Myall Creek I was being prepared, at New England University, before I had found a faith. In an unguarded unselfish moment I volunteered to tutor some Aboriginal primary kids. Having grown up in a totally Anglo world in Sydney, their presence slowly questioned me: "Who are these children? Where do they come from?" Those questions then changed my life. As they still are.

Aboriginal people have crossed and recrossed my path since then, including three years attending AEF churches in La Perouse and Redfern. And then to Myall Creek, where I am involved especially on the political side raising funds for an iconic cultural and education Centre telling the story not only of Myall Creek, but Australia's Frontier Wars more generally. Out of hundreds, Myall Creek was the only massacre ever prosecuted.

As a Christian my involvement is not because I thought it would be the Christian thing to do. God led me into the understanding that journeying into our nation's history is something I need to do. Sydney Friends have a motto: 'The path to the future passes through the past.' I have come to realise "well, I didn't do it" was an un-Biblical position. As Wilberforce said of slavery, 'we are all guilty'. All the way back to Adam and Eve. Failure to see that puts us in the position of the Pharisees who said to Jesus they were not like their ancestors who murdered the prophets. But Jesus knew the truth and within days they had murdered that Prophet all those other prophets pointed to.

It has been a 'death' to see that in me. Yet if today is Friday, Sunday is coming. The resurrection. And that has happened at Myall Creek. In acknowledging the truth, astonishing healing and reconciliation has come. Something beautiful. In others, but in me first of all, something that connects me to my homeland at a profound level, able at last to inherit all the good of God in all our stories buried beneath the pain and shame of our past.

It is that story also that the new Centre will tell. The story of Myall Creek didn't end in 1838. The story is still being written and we are all writing the next chapters.

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Endnotes

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- ¹⁶ All statistics in this section of the report are drawn from *Closing The Gap Prime Minister's Report 2017* (Australian Government, 2017)
- ¹⁷ <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/invasion-of-the-history-rewriters/news-story/d18774ad2553314898261298cef4e17d>
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- ¹⁹ William Blackstone, *Commentaries of the Laws of England* (facsimile edition of first edition published 1765-69, 1979) 104-5 [Bk 1, ch 4]
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- ²² See for example *R v Ballard* Supreme Court of NSW (Forbes CJ and Dowling J) 13 June 1829, AILR Vol 3 No 3 1998
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- ²⁶ See A. F. Holmes, "Just-War Theory", 521-32 in D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field, eds. *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995)
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The Gospel, Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have generally not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW. This resource paper is the result of work done by the Gospel, Society and Culture Committee in response to a request of the Assembly of the PCNSW & ACT to prepare a report with recommendations on Indigenous Reconciliation. That report was presented to the Assembly in July 2017. This edition includes additional paragraphs that note the reception of the Referendum Council's report by the Parliament of Australia in late 2017.

For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see www.gsandc.org.au

The research and writing for this Resource Paper was done by Warren Chan, Sheryl Sarkoezy and Rev Dr John McClean.

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Image page 10: "Mounted Police and Blacks", Waterloo Creek massacre, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C174087>



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