

N.C.C. Programme on Racism

Newsletter



NUMBER 9 JULY 1987

LESSONS FROM ACROSS THE TASMAN

Chris Budden reviews what the Australian churches have said and done so far about the 1988 Bicentenary and the issues at stake. Chris Budden is the Secretary for Social Responsibility and Justice in the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Bicentennial has clearly caught the churches in a situation which reflects the dilemma of their very life. They wish to proclaim the liberating grace of Christ, yet they are so locked into mainstream Australian life that they cannot sustain such proclamation for too long.

In 1980 the General meeting of the Australian Council of Churches passed the following resolution:

- i) the ACC calls upon all churches to consider seriously the implications for the indigenous inhabitants of Australia of the proposed Bicentennial Celebrations in 1988
- ii) and to consider that they as churches and Australian citizens should only take part in those celebrations if sufficient progress has been made towards meeting the just claims of the Aboriginal people for Land Rights, freedom to rebuild their society and financial compensation.

Coming eight years before the event, it was the hope of the ACC that the churches would support these recommendations so that they could have had a substantial impact on the way in which the nation celebrated and the actions it took prior to that celebration.

Yet the hoped-for support did not eventuate. The position of the churches is clearly reflected in three situations:

1. At its 1982 Assembly the Uniting Church in Australia determined that while it would actively participate in planning for the bicentennial it would

"only take part in those celebrations if sufficient progress has been made towards the just claims of the Aboriginal people for land rights, freedom to rebuild their society, and financial compensation."

A process was established to determine what constituted "sufficient progress" and the 1985 Assembly declared that actions taken during the preceding 3 years did not constitute sufficient progress. Yet, at the very same time, it called upon people of the Uniting Church to become fully involved in celebrating the Bicentennial.

2. The 1984 General Meeting of the ACC reaffirmed the resolutions passed in 1980. Yet delegates from the churches indicated during the debate that their own churches would participate fully in the celebrations. The ACC was asked to carry a motion

which the churches would not support and which would convey empty promises to Aboriginal people.

3. Plans were made for an ecumenical social justice statement to be released in September 1987 on a theme relevant to the bicentennial. Yet the Anglican Social Responsibilities Commission withdrew from the process, largely because it could not agree that the dispossession of Aboriginal people is fundamental to Australian history and to the shape of present Australian society, and thus wished to speak of reconciliation without confronting the wrongs of the past.

This activity by the churches raises a number of issues.

First, the bicentennial has raised a fundamental question for the churches about who they stand with in society. The purpose of a celebration is to call to mind those events which are important in a nation's life and self-understanding, and to indicate the way in which people are to be included in society. To refuse to acknowledge the history of dispossession and its continuing effects is to declare that those who have been dispossessed really do not have a significant place in the life of the nation. The churches have indicated that they stand with those who control our society, and it is their story which they wish to have told in 1988.

Second, the process indicated that the churches were not even willing to face the implications of what they were doing. The 1985 resolutions of the UCA hid betrayal of Aboriginal people behind statements about land rights and a call for justice. They asked Aboriginal leaders to help the church "deepen its witness to justice and peace", and then ignored those same leaders when the leaders asked the Assembly not to participate in the Bicentennial. Aboriginal people went away disillusioned, for again the church had said that it wanted to listen and then ignored what was said.

Third, there has been a general refusal to confront the claim that dispossession is a fundamental issue in this debate. Those who prepared the motions for the UCA Assembly in 1985 argued that justice for Aboriginal people and participation in the Bicentennial are two different issues. A similar argument was put forward by those who withdrew from the ecumenical justice process.

Recognising that there are positive things to be celebrated in Australia, yet the question still remains: How is it possible for a nation to celebrate its 'birthday' while ignoring the detrimental impact of that day on many members of the nation? The injustice suffered by Aboriginal people is not just another injustice, it is a situation inextricably tied to the very events which the nation wishes to celebrate. To join those celebrations without taking particular actions to include Aboriginal people in Australian society is to give blessing to dispossession and cultural destruction.

Fourth, there is revealed in this debate a refusal by the church to live with a biblical doctrine of 'reconciliation'. As the UCA Assembly affirmed in 1982,

"that reconciliation which is of God is not human togetherness based on appeasement or sentimentality. It is renewal of life based on God's Word of judgement and forgiveness. It is a costly and joyous process of change, of personal and social conversion in which God sets His people free to become fit instruments of His will."

Yet the churches in Australia have talked constantly of the need to be agents of a non-costly conciliation. There is a desire to bring people together without the pain of working through what has kept them apart. There can be no reconciliation and no forgiveness without repentance and change. While it is proper for the church to seek 'peace' and 'unity' in the nation, this cannot be done at the expense of truth and justice.