

Statement issued by Australian Church
leaders (7 Jan 1988) to mark the 26 Jan
Bicentennial anniversary.

TOWARDS RECONCILIATION IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Reconciliation and Aboriginal Australians

"How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me?"

(Psalm 116, verse 12) was the scripture for the first public Christian worship recorded on the Australian continent. The Reverend Richard Johnson led the white male congregation in prayer on 3 February 1788, the second Sunday after the arrival of the first fleet. The women did not disembark until three days later. It was to be a long time before Aborigines joined in such acts of worship. The first fleet of 1,030 persons were the first Europeans to settle our vast continent which was home for 3-800,000 Aborigines. Governor Phillip's commission from King George III asserted British sovereignty over the eastern half of Australia as far as the 135th degree of longitude. It was not until 1829 that British sovereignty was asserted over the western half of the continent. Even to the British, the west remained terra nullius - "the empty land" - and the Aborigines enjoyed uninterrupted occupancy until 1829.

The six British colonies on this continent were bonded into a nation in 1901 but the Aborigines whose ancestors lost most of their tribal lands were not granted full citizenship rights in the nation on their land until 1967. In the last two decades some of their land rights have been recognised. Aborigines have lived in Australia for at least 40,000 years. While 1988 is the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia, it is at least the 200th bicentenary of Aboriginal settlement. It will also be the 21st birthday of the 1967 referendum which granted Aborigines full citizenship and the opportunity to participate in the public life of the Australian nation.

Thirteen years before the first centenary of nationhood we are invited to participate in the Celebration of a Nation - the bicentenary of the events of 26th January 1788. On that day Caucasian British subjects began permanent settlement in this land. The consequent meeting and mixing of Aboriginal and European cultures has shaped the lives of us all, determined the present Australian ethos, and distinguished what is unique about being Australian. Thus, 26th January, 1788 is a significant date for all Australians. The events of that day created a new tide in the human history of this continent which has created, shaped, or even

destroyed the lifestyles of Australians, whatever their race,

We are said to have been "Living Together" for two hundred years. Yet ignorance, prejudice and discrimination have divided us. In these two hundred years, many Aborigines have lost life, land, language, culture and dignity. Many European Australians have never met or known Aboriginal Australians. Every social indicator still places Aborigines in the most disadvantaged socio-economic group, despite the provision of special services in recent years. Many Aborigines separated from their past still live apart on the fringes of towns, off the bounds of pastoral properties, out of the workforce, beyond the scope of political concern and beyond the protection of legal processes.

The plight of Aborigines and their survival are echoed in the prayer of the psalmist :

"They surrounded me, the snares of death,
with the anguish of the tomb;
They caught me, sorrow and distress.
I called on the Lord's name." (Ps. 116, verse 3)

"The Lord has kept my soul from death,
my eyes from tears and my feet from stumbling.
I will walk in the presence of the Lord
in the land of the living.
I trusted, even when I said :
'I am sorely afflicted',
and when I said in my alarm :
'No one can be trusted'." (ps. 116, verses 8-11)

The past which many Aborigines have endured cannot be undone, but, heeding the call for reconciliation and justice, we might shape a new future and become a nation in which all belong. Seeking reconciliation, we need to seek forgiveness from each other, change of heart and new hope, acknowledging our history of conflict and division which has sapped our nation's commitment to Aborigines. Our Christian Churches need to be more open to receiving joyfully the blessings and insights offered through Aboriginal culture and spirituality. With a change of heart, we might then contribute to a just and proper settlement which requires -

- (1) a secure land base for dispossessed Aboriginal communities with special attention being given to traditional communities on their lands, family

groups on pastoral properties and fringe-dwellers outside country towns.

- (2) a just process for the resolution of conflicting claims to land and its use, especially between Aborigines, pastoralists and miners.
- (3) an assured place for powerless Aborigines in our political processes with provision of Aboriginal Councils at local, state and federal levels.
- (4) a guaranteed future for Aboriginal culture and tradition with legal protection of Aboriginal heritage and public education of all Australians about Aboriginal history and the vitality of contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Our Parliament ought to make formal acknowledgement of the nation's Aboriginal prehistory and the enduring place of our Aboriginal heritage. Our parliamentarians could do this if they were to pass unanimously a suitable Resolution which could be acknowledged by the Queen at the opening of the new Parliament House on 9 May, 1988.

We Australians, Aboriginal and not, cannot be reconciled until we know each other, appreciate each other our cultures and our perspectives on life. We must acknowledge and own our past, even the injustices. We must seek a place of belonging for those on the fringes of our society. Aborigines need an ensured, empowered place in our public life. This land will be home again for all who live here only when we all have a place for our neighbour in our hearts. Reconciled, we can answer the longing of all to belong. Australian Christians might then answer the psalmist, as the first fleeters and their successors could not :

"My vows to the Lord I will fulfil before all his people."
(Psalm 116 verse 14)

In our worship we celebrate our belonging to the lord and to one another and we commemorate his belonging with us. In our lives we are still to reconcile ourselves to belonging together in this land. After 200 years, we are only beginning to understand. Let us celebrate only what we have achieved or dared to hope, together. This may not be much, but it will not ring hollow, and it will resonate in the depths of our hearts and national identity for generations. In 1988, we could make a new beginning, reconciled, "Living Together" in our land.

HEADS OF AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES

The Most Reverend John Grindrod K.B.E.
Archbishop of Brisbane
Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia

Bishop Gabriel Gibran
Antiochian Orthodox Church

Bishop Aghan Baliozian
Armenian Apostolic Church

Bishop Mar Keelis Zaia
Assyrian Church of the East

The Most Reverend Edward Clancy
Archbishop of Sydney
President, Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference

Ms Bronwen M. Meredith
Presiding Clerk
Australian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

The Reverend Neil Gilmore
Federal President, Churches of Christ

The Most Reverend Archbishop Stylianos
Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia

The Reverend L.G. Steicke
President, Lutheran Church of Australia

The Reverend Dr. Gabriel Popescu
Romanian Orthodox Church

Commissioner L. Roy Lovatt
Territorial Commander, Eastern Territory
Salvation Army

Commissioner Donald Campbell
Territorial Commander, Southern Territory
Salvation Army

The Reverend Ian Tanner
President, Uniting Church in Australia

The Reverend Dr. D'Arcy Wood
President, Australian Council of Churches