

Subject: Aboriginal reconciliation

Date: 1997

As we enter 1997, the International Year for Reconciliation, the NSW Council of Churches has set a definitive policy on Aboriginal Reconciliation. Council of Churches President, Rev Ross Clifford said today, "The statement represents much soul searching and mirrors the sentiments of those denominations represented by the Council: The Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney), Baptist Churches of NSW, Churches of Christ, Presbyterian Church, Fellowship of Congregational Churches, The Salvation Army and The Reformed Church. The statement addresses the principle, process and challenge of Aboriginal Reconciliation for our constituent churches."

The Principle of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a positive change in the relationship between human beings [Matthew 5:24; Ephesians 2:11-22] or between God and humanity [Romans 5:1-11] wherein a state of enmity and estrangement is replaced by one of peace and fellowship. As such, reconciliation is at the heart of the message and life of the Christian church: 'when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son' [Romans 5:10a]. The reconciliation of believers with God is not their doing, but God's through Christ. God has acted toward us with utmost grace and even sacrifice in the giving of His own Son. In our lives as Christians we are called to reflect God's attitude to us [Ephesians 5:1-2].

It must be recognised that the process of reconciliation cannot be completed until there is acknowledgement of actions and attitudes, well meaning though they may have been at the time, which caused enmity and estrangement [Mark 1:15; Acts 3:19]. Therefore as Christians we should be willing to humble ourselves for others, to be the least, to repent as necessary, to serve and make sacrifices as Christ did for the church and the world. Christ clearly teaches that "if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift ... first go and be reconciled to your brother" [Matthew 5:24].

The Process of Reconciliation For Us

On the basis of the above, we believe that to practice what we preach we must exhort one another and be involved with Federal and State Governments in the matter of Aboriginal reconciliation. Since European settlement many indigenous inhabitants of Australia have been mistreated, dispossessed of their land and discriminated against by individuals and many community, church and governmental institutions. Thus many present generation Aborigines are still grieving over the past.

The churches of the Council urge one another to consider how we may have been involved in the maltreatment of Aboriginal people. Even though much done by the churches and individual Christians towards Aboriginal people for the positive benefit has been done with compassion and grace according to the understanding of those days, the churches must recognise that there have also been actions that were well meant but harmful, and in some cases that were unjust. For example, the well-intentioned work of some missionaries, who were influenced by the attitudes and understandings of the time, has contributed to the problems Aboriginal people face today – family separation, the loss of language and culture, and an alienation from the wider community.

Therefore we call upon one another to consider where each of our churches needs to recognise the part they played in this sadness; repent where current attitudes need to change; to consider how that might be expressed to the Aboriginal community and how we can set an example in actively pursuing with the reconciliation process. Among the many issues to be addressed, is the currently high profile issue of land rights. We recognise that any reinstatement of land rights is not to be understood as land being granted gratuitously, but as land being restored belatedly. Such positive input should help those affected adversely to move through their grieving process, and will require grace and forgiveness on the part of Aborigines as well.

The Challenge of Reconciliation

The churches of the Council recognise that reconciliation between two different cultures is a very difficult task. It takes great listening skills and determination, as well as a genuine willingness to be reconciled. And it must be acknowledged that matters are further complicated by the politicisation of the reconciliation process.

As a matter of urgency, despite the difficulties, the member churches of the NSW Council of Churches, as part of the body of Christ representing Christ on earth, cannot give up on matters of reconciliation. So the Council urges our State and Federal Governments to continue the Aboriginal reconciliation process, with true justice and humility.

Council likewise urges its member churches to teach those under their ministry to apply the Biblical principles of reconciliation, to challenge attitudes of arrogance and prejudice and to look at changing the structures that continue to thwart the Aboriginal reconciliation process.