

**The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Ecumenical Commission of**



**The National Council of Churches in Australia's**



**Submission to  
Senate Legal and Constitutional  
Reference Committee  
Inquiry into  
Progress towards National  
Reconciliation.**

**November 2002**

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## **Introduction**

Firstly, let us explain what the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) is, and is not.

The NCCA comprises fifteen Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The Council is not a "superchurch," with authority over its member churches. We can tell you what we believe the churches are thinking and doing. We can advise them as to what they ought to be thinking and doing. But we cannot command them. Each church is autonomous, making decisions according to its own rights, following its own timetable and processes, consulting with its own Indigenous members and taking account of its own inner dynamics.

In preparing this Submission the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the NCCA is aware that church involvement in supporting and partnering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has a significantly longer history than the formal Reconciliation Process – commenced by an Act of Parliament in 1991.

Commitment to Indigenous concerns has been a consistent feature of the ecumenical history of Australian churches.

By saying this we do not put the Churches up as experts in this area but as a group who are grappling with our past, trying to listen to our people (indigenous and others), drawing from our traditions and have made some significant changes to date. This has been an uplifting experience for us all and a sign of hope for the future. There is more to be done and we are committed to this process.

## **Our Observations**

We see the "Declaration towards Reconciliation" as a fine vision for the movement and affirm its elements as the direction for the future. We cannot see why anyone would need to change it.

We welcome the Commonwealth Government's response to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's final report: 'Reconciliation: Australia's Challenge'. We are disappointed though with the direction of the Government's response to Reconciliation. Its "practical approach" to Reconciliation has some merit, but there needs to be more emphasis placed on promoting a national approach to owning our past, rectifying injustices, building on the work of the last decade and working towards a better future. Assimilation is not the answer.

To achieve true Reconciliation we need a commitment to the process on a national level. This requires strong leadership. Reconciliation also requires that the facts must be faced, not avoided. The Churches leadership on this has been quite strong. The significant presence of church people in key reconciliation events, such as the Reconciliation Conventions in Melbourne and Wollongong, Corroborree 2000 and the Bridge Walks is as much a continuation of long standing church commitment as it is a readiness to participate in new initiatives for developing right relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. With the backing of our own traditions we have achieved much and hope to achieve more.

Reconciliation requires that apologies be made and meant, and accepted. Churches like many other community organisations have expressed their sorrow and in most cases have given a formal apology. Non-Indigenous Australians were all involved, whether they knew it or not, whether they want to acknowledge it or not. It was people like their parents, and their parents before them, who elected our governments that adopted these policies. It was ordinary Australians - those in the pews

as well as those who weren't - who remained silent, who assumed the governments knew what they were doing, who just didn't see or, worse, just didn't feel. The responsibility rests on the nation as a whole, and on all the organisations - political, religious, educational, media, the lot - that so tragically failed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and in so doing failed us all. It remains a matter of deep sorrow to us that the Federal government cannot see its way clear to say sorry.

The recommendations contained in the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's final report together with the Roadmap for Reconciliation, are things that are achievable and can be done with a unifying affect. They are very good signposts towards addressing unfinished business. There has been too much emphasis placed on the divisions between Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and the rest of the Nation. We have seen, over many decades, that dealing with these issues has not caused as much division within the Churches and Nation as it is being portrayed. Usually leaders who fan that division only make the divisions worse. Differences in opinion can be constructive, as long as we can sit and discuss our way through our differences and be open to the other.

Reconciliation requires resources. The lack of real follow up funds by the Commonwealth to continue the process of reconciliation is concerning and could be seen as a lack on commitment from them.

The Churches have been strong on the ideal of self-determination and have given practical expression within the NCCA with the setting up in 1970 of the Commission on Aboriginal Development and the NATSIEC IN 1989. Within many of the member churches of NCCA there has been a parallel growth in commitment to support the struggle for justice and reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC), the Federal Aborigines Board (FAB) of the Churches of Christ and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress have been formed as a response by their churches as a move towards equal partnership. This has not made Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders move away from the churches but has helped them express a closer relationship as a vital part of our communities.

### **Conclusion**

The churches see that Reconciliation is possible if there is commitment and strong leadership to owning our past, rectifying injustices, building on the work of the last decade and working towards a better future in true partnership. This process has been an uplifting experience for us and a sign of hope for the future. We hope that the Commonwealth and State Governments can see that it can be also an uplifting experience for the Nation.