



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

July 2010

Munguddor Bi Buya

Munguddor Bi Buya is an initiative of NATSIEC which supports and encourages Indigenous Theology.

The name Munguddor Bi Buya is a combination of three words each meaning “light”: Munguddor from the Bunjalung Aboriginal language; Bi and Buya from the two languages of the Torres Strait.

Prayer for Reconciliation and Christian Unity

Creator God, may the power of
your grace transform us;

Christ, give us courage and
hope to manifest the unity we
have in you, and to share our
life with each other and the
world;

Holy Spirit empower us to work
for justice for people and the
earth.

God, in your grace, transform
the world. Amen



An occasional paper from Munguddor Bi Buya

Illuminations

Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing Christ today

Executive Secretary of NATSIEC, Graeme Mundine, recently attended the centenary of the World Mission Conference which was held in Edinburgh – as it was in 1910. Here, Graeme responds to some questions about his experience and observations of Edinburgh 2010.

What was Edinburgh 2010 and why was it significant?

The conference was the celebration of 100 years of mission. The original conference in 1910 set the course of bringing Christ to the world. The 1910 conference really had two outcomes, one of which was to send more missionaries out into the world and secondly, it was also the beginning of the roots of the modern ecumenical movement.

From an Indigenous perspective, what was the significance of Edinburgh 2010?

What was lacking in 1910 was a hearing of the voices of those that were being missioned to, which were most often Indigenous peoples.

In 1910, there was no diversity of cultures or experiences represented in the conference, so no voices were heard about the experience this wave of missionaries brought to different peoples and cultures. Today, of course, there is a huge diversity of voices which need to be heard.

Why was it important to be there?

It was important for there to be some sort of representation to voice the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and, as was quickly found out, the global Indigenous context; on which the missionary efforts have had such a great impact.

What did you particularly appreciate about the conference?

It was good to see the strengthening of the network of Indigenous peoples and alternate viewpoints. I particularly enjoyed renewing contacts and also meeting the new Indigenous people on the scene.

Was this conference different to 1910; do you think you were heard?

After 100 years I would ask the question are we, Indigenous Peoples, still just window dressings on the edge of Christianity or are we a really vital part of the foundations of the Church? Personally, I think that we are a vital part of the Church; but I don't think that the outward signs of that were evident at Edinburgh 2010. Yes, there were magnificent visual contributions from the Africans, the Indians, the South Americans, and other cultural groups. But I am not sure that our voices were heard through the formal structures.



Graeme Mundine leads the singing during an intervention by Indigenous delegates (photo credit: WCC).

Cont...

What did you do to give Indigenous Peoples a voice at the conference?

It was obvious in the hallways and over meals that there were several people asking the question, “when will we be heard”. So a small group of like minded people, who were feeling disenfranchised by the process, met and decided to make an “intervention”. We didn’t want to upset anyone, but we did want to be heard. We were able to arrange some time to make this intervention which we did by singing a very simple song, from Australia in fact, about the Holy Spirit in the Land. We also made a statement through Psalm 2 which was to basically say, “ we have survived, and that God loves us, Indigenous Peoples. As it says in v. 7, “You are my Son. This day I become your Father”. If you read all of Psalm 2 you can see that it is about smashing what is already there. To us it spoke of the need to rethink the place of those who have been missioned to.

The good thing about the intervention was that it was an opportunity for our voices to be heard in a plenary session, even though we had to create the opportunity. The disappointing aspect to the 2010 conference was that even today the White Western, and in this case academic, way of doing things always seems to take precedence, but there are new emerging ways of doing and being Church and we need to explore more about what that means for the whole Church.

Another great outcome of our intervention was that it brought together all those groups who felt disenfranchised by the conference program. Whether we were from Africa, South America, Asia, Oceania e.t.c., to see us all sit together and sing together during this intervention was a powerful and uplifting image which remains in my mind as being one of the highpoints of the conference.

I think our voice was heard. It may take a while for our message to sink in, but people I have spoken to since then have expressed how good the intervention was because it was a subtle action, but powerful in its message.

What do you think the conference achieved?

Good question! Time will tell as people go away and reflect on all that was presented and discussed. There were no direct outcomes of the conference. In 1910 a working group was formed to carry things forward. At this conference there

was no vote to have such a group. What it did do was call for a sense of renewal in our Churches at home and a sense of the need to re-evangelise those around us. I think there is a need for a new mission, most people in the world have heard of, or connected with Christ; what is needed therefore is a re-evangelising and re-invigorating of people who already know about Christ.

Were your expectations of the conference met?

I expected that Indigenous voices, and other alternate voices, would be given space to express themselves. I expected diverse voices to be heard. This did eventually happen, albeit unintentionally! I will wait and see what action comes from it. Already I do know that there are Indigenous groups who are writing their own reflections.

How will Indigenous peoples go forward together from here?

One outcome was that it gave the World Council of Churches the opportunity to say they want to have a gathering of Indigenous peoples and create more opportunities to come together. So later this year there is another meeting of Indigenous theologians and next year they want a wider meeting of Indigenous peoples.

Many voices are still not being heard, there are new voices entering the arena, new people who are thinking and talking about these things. So it highlights how important development and formation is. It’s important that we seek out the Indigenous Doctors and Masters and other thinkers who are exploring these issues and who can open the door to mutual sharing.

In 100 years, what do you think the legacy of the 2010 conference will be?

I think it will have provided impetus to renew and discover what Christ means to Indigenous groups. In 100 years I would hope that we are celebrating more diversity within the Church, knowing that we already have unity in Christ – although there may be still areas of division.

In 100 years I would hope that we are celebrating more diversity within the Church, knowing that we already have unity in Christ – although there may be still areas of division.

Workshop presentation— Mission and Power

Graeme was given the opportunity to make a five minute presentation during one of the workshops at the conference on Mission and Power.

Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

*Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."
(Gospel of John ch.11 vv.43-44)*

I am starting with this story because for me, it is a powerful story which helps us understand the Australian Aboriginal context, indeed the context for Indigenous peoples around the world. The raising of Lazarus speaks to me of a powerful challenge to all of us to share fresh possibilities of new life with their Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Like Lazarus, too many Aboriginal people are "entombed". They are entombed by poverty; by violence; by the effects of colonization; the legacy of missionaries; by exclusion; by racism; by more than 200 years of having land taken and culture trampled and by policies and practices from Governments, Churches and others which are designed literally, and metaphorically, to keep us bound and hidden, out of sight, behind the tomb stone.

Indigenous peoples around the world, despite our different cultures, languages and contexts have many of these issues in common. As we talk about mission and power, a key question we must ask is how do we, as Churches and as individuals, go about the necessary work of setting free our Indigenous sisters and brothers from the yoke of imperialism and colonialism? And what are we, Indigenous peoples, doing to set ourselves and our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters free from the yoke of imperialism and colonialism? For when one suffers from the effects of these twin 'isms' we all suffer, as individuals and as a nation.

That is not to say that we must all become one people, we must understand and appreciate our differences but also work together to bring

greater understanding and reconciliation. I am reminded of a story told by highly respected Aboriginal, Pastor George Rosendale, about two well known Australian birds, the black and white cockatoos.



© Kimberley Clipart

They were brothers. One day the white cockatoo found the black cockatoo sitting under a shady tree looking angry and upset.

'What is wrong, brother?' 'I'm angry with dad because he made me black. Why didn't he make me like you? I'm going to change myself'. He went to his uncle's country and asked him for honey and clay. 'Get as much as you want, there's plenty there'.

He got the clay and honey and went back home. He powdered the clay and rubbed honey all over himself and put the powdered clay on. He looked at himself and said, 'Now I look like my brother'. His grandpa got so angry with him that he called on the monsoon to bring rain. It washed all the clay off him.

This story reminds us that we must be who we were meant to be, we must be in touch with our God given essence, it is no good trying to be something else and it is no good trying to make people into something else. We were created as unique and very special people and we must be true to that. There is nothing wrong with difference; each of us brings unique gifts to our life and our ministries.

It is useful to be mindful of how we can work together as different peoples as we consider the call of Jesus to bring good news to the poor and to set captives free and to recover sight. He said to us:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people. Luke 3: v.18-19

Is this not the essence of Jesus' mission? It is no coincidence that these words were Jesus' first

There is nothing wrong with difference; each of us brings unique gifts to our life and our ministries.

Cont...

words. They were words that guided him throughout his life. If you look at his life; he challenges the Pharisees and lawmen; he hung out with the sinners and spent his life healing those who were mentally, spiritually and physically sick. It says to us that we are to allow these people to be free from the things that bind them.

As Indigenous Christians we look to our Churches to walk with us as we throw off those things that oppress us. But often, we encounter imperialism and colonialism there too. It is not always our experience that Churches are truly opening eyes and hearts to Indigenous cultures and peoples.

Last year, we held an Indigenous Theology conference in Australia, during which we took some time to look at the experiences the participants had of mission. It was an interesting exercise. Some of the participants were non-Indigenous people who had been, or still are, missionaries. Other participants were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who had been raised on missions or who were Stolen Generations (that is forcibly taken from their families), or who had been educated by the Church.

Many of the comments and stories we heard recognised the complexity of the mission experience. They recognised that missions saved many lives. They were places of protection from atrocities being perpetrated against Aboriginal people at the time. Other experiences were negative and the pain and hurt is still palpable. Hurt from being taken away from home; being treated as unpaid labour; being cut off from family and culture. While some missionaries educated and trained and were good Christian role models; many also perpetuated harsh, racist policies. Some abused the people entrusted into their care and their actions were far removed from those principles they preached. These are the legacies we bring into our interactions and relationships today. And these are the things we must acknowledge and address if we are to truly roll back that stone, unbind ourselves and set ourselves free.

So what can we do?

Time does not allow a full presentation of what we can do. But there are two things that I think are of the utmost importance. First, we need to empower the local Indigenous church to live the life that Christ has called them to. But Indigenous Church needs support; don't presuppose that they can do it themselves without proper support and resources.

Second, and this is also related to the kind of support that Indigenous Church needs, we need to remember that the "White Western European Church" does not have all the answers and is not the only way to experience and live church. In the Australian context we need to explore and understand more about what an "Australian Church" looks like and to do that we can learn a lot from Indigenous peoples. As one of our Aboriginal church leaders, Bishop James Leftwich, often says: Indigenous peoples were once missioned to, now we are part of the mission force. We are equal partners in the creation of the community of church of the future. We need the mainstream church to listen - not to impose; to learn - not to dictate. Open your hearts and minds to what Indigenous peoples offer and then we can walk together to live the life that Christ has called each and every one of us.



© Kimberley Clipart

While some missionaries educated and trained and were good Christian role models; many also perpetuated harsh, racist policies.
