



## **REPARATIONS AND RECONCILIATION - A Perspective from the Churches**

### **Address given by David Gill at the "Moving Forward: Achieving Reparations for the Stolen Generations," conference held at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, 15-16 August 2001.**

First, I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

Second, I must acknowledge the hurt and pain of all who bear scars from the tragedy inflicted on the Stolen Generations.

As a prologue, let me explain what the National Council of Churches in Australia 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. I can tell you what I believe the churches are thinking and doing. I can advise them as to what they ought to be thinking and doing. But I cannot command them. Each church is autonomous, making decisions according to its own lights, following its own timetable and processes, consulting with its own Indigenous members and taking account of its own inner dynamics.

Of the Council's fifteen member churches, six were directly involved, one way or another, in dealing with the consequences of government policies that produced the Stolen Generations. Most but not all of the churches that were so involved belong to the NCCA.

But a clear line between churches that were "involved" and those that weren't is hard to draw. For we non-Indigenous Australians were all involved, whether we knew it or not, whether we want to acknowledge it or not. It was people like my 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 not just on six churches that found themselves coping with the consequences of government policies. It 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.

With the topic of today's panel, I am helped by two things. First, the NCCA Executive earlier this year adopted a public statement on "The Bringing Them Home Report and the Churches". That statement emerged from consultation between national heads of churches and the NCCA's Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, and it has been endorsed by the member churches individually. Second, the NCCA's governing body, its National Forum, last month received and acted on a major report prepared by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission. Entitled "Continuing the Journey ...", the report reviews church responses to the reconciliation process in general and to the Bringing Them Home Report in particular. The two documents, taken together, articulate the common mind that has been developing in Australia's churches.

I will touch on the main points.

1. Reconciliation requires that the facts must be faced, not avoided. To quote from the NCCA statement: "The fundamental truth of the stories of the Stolen Generations, and their pain, cannot be denied. As representatives of the churches, we call on our people, and the nation at large, to acknowledge the validity of the Bringing Them Home Report and its recommendation

2. Reconciliation requires that apologies be made and meant, and accepted. Churches like many other community organisations have expressed their sorrow. It remains a matter of regret to us that the federal government cannot see its way clear to do the same.



3. Reconciliation requires specific actions by organisations that received the victims of Indigenous child removal. The churches have committed themselves to make their records accessible. For example, we now have "A Piece of the Story," a national directory of records of Catholic organisations caring for children separated from families, as well as "A Guide to Records of Indigenous Australians in the Lutheran Archives" covering records of the Lutheran missions in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Where difficulties are experienced in knowing who to approach in church structures for such information, the NCCA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission stands ready to assist. Where records don't exist churches have been urged to develop the fullest accounting possible. Allegations of specific instances of abuse, of course, must be addressed.

4. Reconciliation requires that culturally appropriate healing and counseling be made available to people affected by the forcible removals. Beyond the already significant ministries being undertaken by Indigenous people for Indigenous people, the NCCA has urged churches to support the training of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in counseling and healing.

5. Reconciliation requires that the churches determine their responses to any proposed reparations tribunal. Clearly, we need an effective alternative to litigation that is suited to the Australian context. Clarification as to the scope, membership, accountability, resourcing and legal status of any proposed tribunal is awaited, and with such information the churches advised by their Indigenous members will determine their stances.

6. Reconciliation requires resources. To quote again from the NCCA statement: "The churches support the establishment by the Council of Australian Governments of a national fund, as part of the healing process. We call on all Australian governments, whose predecessors legislated for laws which gave warrant to practices leading to the Stolen Generations, to contribute generously to the fund. Because all Australians were represented by those governments, all Australians and all agencies - including church agencies - which cooperated with such practices are urged to contribute to the fund."



7. Perhaps most difficult of all, reconciliation requires deepened understanding. Hence the NCCA National Forum urged member churches to take further their efforts to express the gospel in ways that respect Indigenous spirituality, to develop cross-cultural and anti-racism programmes for those being trained for ministry, to teach Stolen Generations history in their schools, to mine the Roadmap for Reconciliation as a resource for the future.

8. Reconciliation requires a shared effort by us all. The various stakeholders must stop playing off each other: the government versus the churches, Indigenous versus non-Indigenous, this organisation versus that organisation. It is time to move beyond the blame game, beyond institutional power plays. The churches are getting their act together. They stand ready to be partners in such a joint effort, within whatever mechanisms may be put in place - if, that is, others are prepared to accept us.

For us, reconciliation is not, ultimately, about policies and programmes. Some of you will remember Noel Pearson's comment towards the end of the 1997 Reconciliation Convention. The Prime Minister had made a rather disappointing speech, and Noel was urging us not to be weighed down by our disappointment. "They are only the government of the day," he said. "They are not God".

But that leaves us with the key question. Who or what is God? Where can we hang our hope, place our confidence, find our strength?

As the churches wrestle afresh with the ancient mysteries of faith, we hope you will allow us to work with you, and to move forward with you on the long road towards a new beginning.