



National Council of Churches in Australia NATSIEC

NATSIEC Forum on the Northern Territory Emergency Response Forum Statement - June 2009

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians, we strongly believe that the Creator gave us this land, our identity, and the wisdom to care for it. We recognise that there are many issues to resolve as a Nation, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER - the Intervention). We believe that, in its current form, the Intervention does not and will not work for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal Peoples have a right to be involved at all levels and stages of developing just and right solutions for community issues. Policy development needs to be driven by Aboriginal Peoples and developed with respect to Aboriginal ways. Appropriate protocols must be followed to ensure that negotiations have the agreement and guidance of Traditional leaders. Policies that are implemented from a central government body without proper negotiated partnerships will not lead to practical and sustainable outcomes.

We believe that Aboriginal Peoples have not been listened to and our stories have not been heard. The Intervention was implemented without consultation with Aboriginal Peoples and Government continues to fail to listen with respect and in a manner which is culturally appropriate. Further, we do not believe that 'consultation' will lead to just and right outcomes for Aboriginal Peoples in the Northern Territory or elsewhere. Rather, we assert the right of Aboriginal Peoples to negotiate agreements as equal partners who have the right to make their own decisions. We resist any attempts to return to a paternalistic mind set where Governments, or Churches, tell us what to do. Aboriginal Peoples have fought against such injustices in the past, and we believe that blanket responses and policies, such as the Intervention, are as disempowering as were those protectionist days. As a nation, we need to support Aboriginal Peoples to work on solutions that lead to positive outcomes. Government must respond to individual community needs and urgently establish much needed services particularly in the areas of health, housing and education. Government must negotiate agreements which respect the right of Aboriginal Peoples to take responsibility for achieving negotiated outcomes.

We have a particular concern about the discriminatory nature of the Intervention. We know that many Aboriginal people have experienced shame and humiliation due to discriminatory measures such as income quarantining. We strongly assert that all Intervention measures must be based on a human rights approach and address Aboriginal poverty and discrimination. There is never a case for suspending human rights and all Government policy must be in accordance with the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975) (RDA)* as well as human rights principles, such as those contained within the *United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights* and

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Orthodox Church

Armenian
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Assyrian Church
of the East

Chinese Methodist
Church

Churches of Christ

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Federation

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Orthodox Church

Greek
Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society
of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian
Orthodox Church

Salvation Army

Syrian
Orthodox Church

Uniting Church

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the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. We acknowledge that the Government has committed to reinstating those sections of the RDA which were suspended, however, we make the observation that this must happen as a matter of urgency and that the legislation must fully reinstate all the provisions of the RDA.

In addition to the protection of the laws of this nation, we also believe that Aboriginal Peoples have God given rights in this land. We believe that Government and Churches should nurture and give greater recognition to the strong spirituality of Aboriginal people. The spirituality which sustains us, gives us resilience and without which transformation cannot endure. Dehumanising policies and attitudes that deny and damage this spirituality and that contribute to a loss of identity, culture and land will not lead to sustainable change. This can only be achieved when the strong Aboriginal spirit is restored, when the rights of Aboriginal Peoples to determine their own future is asserted and when Aboriginal world views are respected and affirmed by Governments and non-Indigenous people.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians, representing many different denominations and backgrounds, we are united against the NT Intervention in its current form. We stand in solidarity with our Northern Territory brothers and sisters and we send messages of hope to them.

We call on Governments to:

- 1.1 Learn to respectfully listen.
- 1.2 Recognise the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to ***negotiate*** agreements with governments. We stress *negotiation* as distinct from *consulting* with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples about the implementation of policy and programs which have already been developed and decided on.
- 1.3 Ensure that appropriate protocols, as determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, are followed in all negotiations and interactions.
- 1.4 Recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the right to negotiate in their own languages. To ensure that Governments, and their agencies, learn local languages and understand the nuances of the different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and the importance of accurate translations. Governments can learn from Churches who have also come to recognise the importance of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.
- 1.5 Rectify the lack of negotiation with regard to the NTER, to date, by urgently facilitating a “negotiation forum” to address government policies and

programs. Aboriginal Peoples will control and set the agenda of this forum, the purpose of which is to:

- 1.5a Bring Aboriginal People together from across the NT.
 - 1.5b Allow a diversity of people to be heard, including those who are connected on the ground and are community voices as well as those who are representing organisations.
 - 1.5c Develop a position on an appropriate policy response to the issues facing Aboriginal communities in the NT.
 - 1.5d Agree to appropriate protocols.
 - 1.5e Agree to an appropriate methodology that recognises and affirms the diversity of Aboriginal ways of meeting, making decisions and developing processes.
 - 1.5f Ensure that Governments are negotiating with spokespeople who are elected and endorsed by the communities they are representing and are true community voices and the voices of the Traditional owners.
- 1.6 Acknowledge that compulsory income quarantining is discriminatory and to recognise that if the policy is as beneficial as is claimed then it must be applied to all those on welfare, irrespective of race.
- 1.7 Explore more positive ways of managing income such as providing education programs on income management and budgeting. Education is a far more effective and less discriminatory tool and we ask the Federal Government to identify models of best practice from the many successful programs that have been developed to achieve this end. To implement these programs there will be a need to use Aboriginal teachers and to pay appropriately for language training. Further development of this policy agenda should come from additional funding and not from the already committed budget.
- 1.8 Learn from success. Look at what is already working, learn from mistakes and develop models that build on proven successful strategies. The Churches can provide a good model of how to work together. We are all different and have different cultures and ways of worship; still we can all work together.
- 1.9 Be accountable for the words that Government uses. For example, when the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs makes statements such as “as human beings we all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect” the Government must be held accountable for those words and can not at the same time implement discriminatory policy.

- 1.10 Immediately reinstate all the suspended provisions of the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975)*.
- 1.11 Ensure that the principles of the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are enshrined in Australian Law.

We call on Churches to:

- 2.1 Encourage their congregations to be a prophetic voice and effectively and actively pray for:
 - 2.1a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their leaders.
 - 2.1b Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Churches and Ministries.
 - 2.1c Injustices and Human Rights.

2.1.1 We encourage the Churches to increase the effectiveness of their prayer by developing a deeper understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. One way in which this can be achieved is by inviting local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Peoples or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Church leaders to speak. We also encourage Churches and their congregations to put their money and feet (actions) where their prayers (mouths) are.
- 2.2 Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, churches and ministries to create a platform for engagement and to facilitate the education of congregations to increase their understanding and awareness about the real issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as well as suggested solutions and directions.
- 2.3 Actively promote positive and successful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples at all levels of Churches.
- 2.4 Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to link and integrate all aspects of ministries and services within, and between, denominations to maximise the effectiveness of all arms of the Churches' ministries and agencies.
- 2.5 Be accountable to any covenants, policies or partnerships that have been agreed to with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and ensure ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of such initiatives.
- 2.6 Make a commitment to provide national support and resources for Northern Territory Churches. The resource burden of adequately addressing the issues in the Northern Territory should be shared by

other States and Territories. Practical support in funding now will go towards rectifying the lack of adequate funding over the past forty years.

- 2.7 Increase support for existing bodies such as NATSIEC and NATSICA to enable them to continue to build their capacity and ability to respond to matters of importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as well as to continue and strengthen their ability to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples from all denominations together to work with a common purpose and voice.
- 2.8 Work with existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative Church structures to appoint a national coordinator to monitor the NTER on behalf of all Churches. Also encourage each congregation to support a person or group to monitor the NT Intervention and to liaise with the national monitoring coordinator.
- 2.9 Work with existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative Church structures to use Church resources to effectively influence media to tell true stories and to also highlight the positives. Use all available means and networks, both national and local, including radio, newspapers, newsletters, internet etc.
- 2.10 Work with existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative Church structures to develop and fund a Church forum in the NT with the aim of bringing together Church leaders, Aboriginal people and their Church leaders and representatives, from all denominations, to develop a united commitment to work towards National and State policy changes.
- 2.11 Request the World Council of Churches to organise a “Living Letters” visit to the Northern Territory.

Endorsed by the members of:

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance.