



*Delegates to the ecumenical conference*

## NATSIEC Christ and Culture Conference

Recently, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) held its third Christ and Culture Conference at the St Joseph's Centre for Reflective Living at Baulkham Hills.

This conference was an opportunity for participants to explore faith in their own cultural context. The conference was facilitated by Dr Anthony G Reddie from the UK.

Dr Reddie was able to draw on his experience of working at a grassroots level with faith communities to enable delegates to explore the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context in Australia.

By sharing his experience of being a descendant of the slave trade he hoped to be "a mirror to help delegates to see what opportunities God may be placing before you, in your context, at this time in order to be agents of change in the future."

The participants, who were all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Christians, came from all over Australia and from several different denominations including Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and Salvation Army.

Delegates included five Aboriginal women from Western Sydney: Rhonda Randall, Mavis Indich, Janice Brown, Margaret Farrell, and Jenny Ebsworth.

Janice Brown said she found Anthony Reddie to be a wonderful speaker. "Theology has always been a part of my life. Years ago I started a theology course but didn't get the chance to finish it. A lot of the time was spent reflecting on everyday living and incidents in our lives.

"Anthony reminded us that if you are a Christian you must speak up about injustice. Like Saint Mary MacKillop – never see a need without trying to do something about it."

Rhonda Randall said she was encouraged by hearing other delegates ask questions, which helped to deepen her understanding. "I know now that sometimes Bible stories have a deeper meaning than when you first hear them. A question came into my head and I was too nervous to ask it but a friend encouraged me.

"The response from Anthony lifted up my spirits. He said, 'People go to universities to study for a long time to get to the stage where you are to have asked this question.'

"I really enjoyed the conference and made lots of friendships."

Jenny Ebsworth said she enjoyed the way Anthony facilitated the workshops. "I have wanted to attend a theology course but couldn't do so because of raising a granddaughter. I found the conference very interesting and it gave me an insight to how theology works. The other participants really inspired me."

Margaret Farrell said she enjoyed the workshop where Anthony told the story of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak at the same time as Jairus, a very important man, asked Jesus to heal his daughter.

"Anthony gave us something to think about and this is what I remember. The woman in the story didn't feel important and didn't want to be noticed. Her faith was strong enough to believe that if she touched Jesus' cloak she would be healed. She was healed immediately. Jesus sees deep into our hearts and recognises the faith that we have. He responds when He sees that faith."

Mavis Indich said the conference took her back to when she was a young girl at the Catholic school at Moora, WA. "I felt the same feelings I had when I made my First Communion. In those days I felt very close to God and wanted to go to church every day. I used to hang around at the Sisters' place before I went to school. I connected with the Sisters. At the conference I met another participant who is part of my family and that was exciting."

The delegates said they were grateful to those Religious congregations who supported them financially to attend the conference: Sisters of Mercy Parramatta, Sisters of St Joseph of California, Franciscan Friars – Waverley, Presentatio Sisters – Lismore, Columban Missionarie Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Benedictines – Arcadia, Loreto Sisters, Christian Brothers, Las Casas Dominican Centre and the Society of Jesus.

The richness that people brought from different cultures and church experiences ensured lively and engaging discussions with issues such as contextualising scripture, narrative theologies and understanding fixed identities and complex subjectivity.

Some of the conference sessions and Dr Reddie's talks in other places are available at the NATSIEC website: [www.ncca.org.au/natsiec](http://www.ncca.org.au/natsiec)